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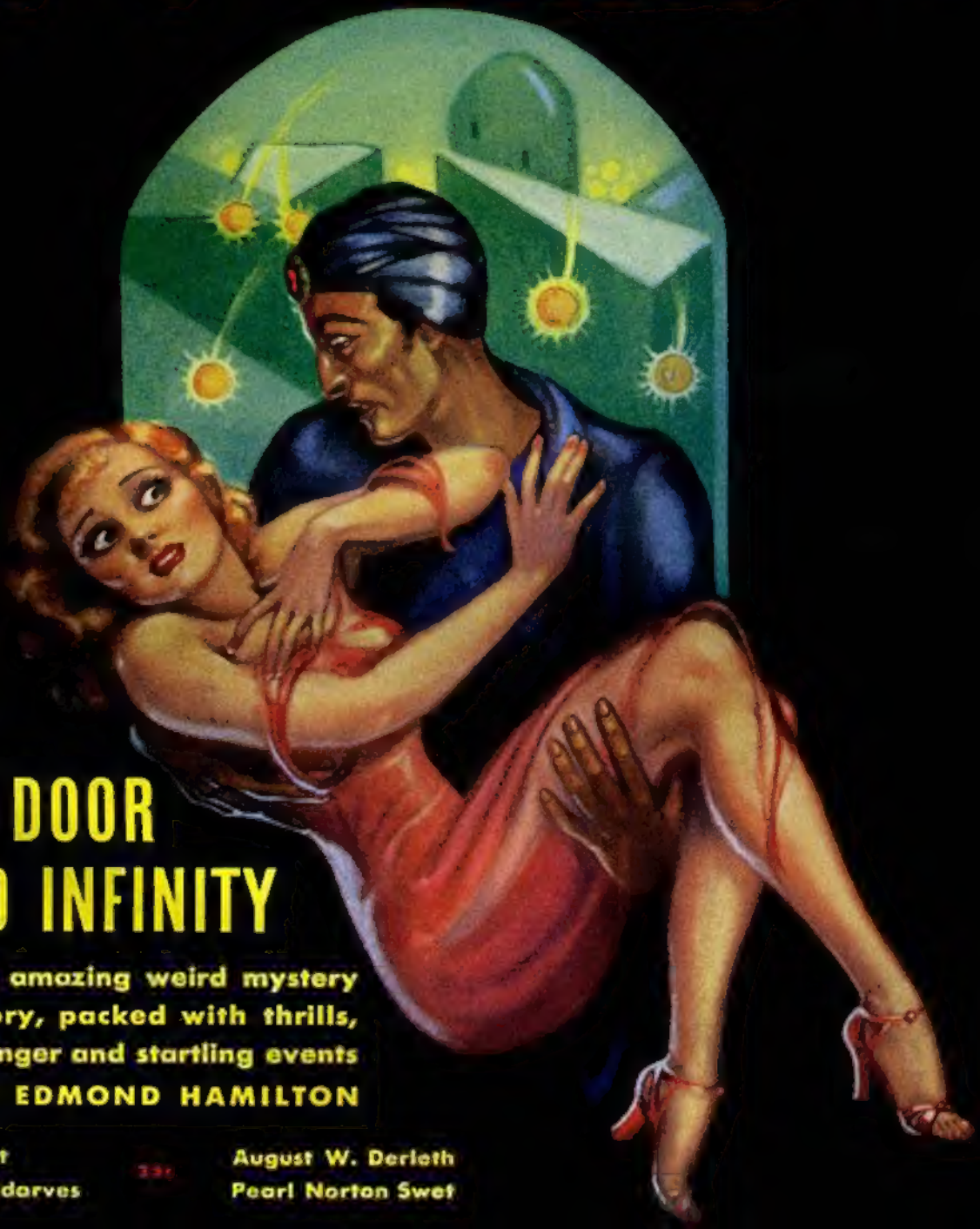

THE DOOR INTO INFINITY

an amazing weird mystery story, packed with thrills, danger and startling events

By EDMOND HAMILTON

Paul Ernst
G. G. Pendarves

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Weird Tales

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Volume 28 CONTENTS FOR AUGUST-SEPTEMBER, 1936 Number 2

Cover Design . . . . . **M. Brundage**
Illustrating a scene in "The Door into Infinity"

The Door into Infinity . . . . . **Edmond Hamilton** 130
An amazing weird mystery story, packed with thrills, danger and startling events

Lycanthropus . . . . . **C. Edgar Bolen** 153
Verse

Mask of Death . . . . . **Paul Ernst** 154
An uncanny story of the terrible doom with which Doctor Satan struck down his enemies

Werewolf of the Sahara . . . . . **G. G. Pendarves** 173
A tremendous tale about Gunnar the werewolf and the evil Arab sheikh El Shabur

The Medici Boots . . . . . **Pearl Norton Swet** 194
What mystic power did these amethyst-decorated boots from medieval Florence carry over into our own time?

Red Nails (part 2) . . . . . **Robert E. Howard** 205
A three-part serial story of a barbarian adventurer, and a weird roofed city, and the strangest people ever spawned

Swamp Demons . . . . . **C. A. Butz** 221
Verse

Death Holds the Post . . . . . **August W. Derleth and Mark Schorer** 222
A tale of the French Foreign Legion, living dead men, and an unearthly horror that struck at the bodies of soldiers in an African outpost

The Diary of Philip Westerly . . . . . **Paul Compton** 233
A strange, brief tale of the terrible fear engendered by a man's loathsome reflection in a mirror

In the Dark . . . . . **Ronal Kayser** 236
It was a story of sheer, unrelieved horror that old Asa Gregg poured into the dictaphone

Weird Story Reprint:

Four Wooden Stakes . . . . . **Victor Rowan** 240
A strange story of vampires from an early issue of WEIRD TALES

The Eyrie 250
Our readers exchange opinions about this magazine

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Door Into Infinity

By EDMOND HAMILTON

An amazing weird mystery story, packed with thrills, danger and startling events

1. The Brotherhood of the Door

"WHERE leads the Door?"

"It leads outside our world."

"Who taught our forefathers to open the Door?"

"They Beyond the Door taught them."

"To whom do we bring these sacrifices?"

"We bring them to Those Beyond the Door."

"Shall the Door be opened that They may take them?"

"Let the Door be opened!"

Paul Ennis had listened thus far, his haggard face uncomprehending in expression, but now he interrupted the speaker.

"But what does it all mean, inspector? Why are you repeating this to me?"

"Did you ever hear anyone speak words like that?" asked Inspector Pierce Campbell, leaning tautly forward for the answer.

"Of course not—it just sounds like gibberish to me," Ennis exclaimed. "What connection can it have with my wife?"

He had risen to his feet, a tall, blond young American whose good-looking face was drawn and worn by inward agony, whose crisp yellow hair was brushed back from his forehead in disorder, and whose blue eyes were haunted with an anguished dread.

He kicked back his chair and strode across the gloomy little office, whose single window looked out on the thickening, foggy twilight of London. He bent across the dingy desk, gripping its edges with his hands as he spoke tensely to the man sitting behind it.

"Why are we wasting time talking here?" Ennis cried. "Sitting here talking, when anything may be happening to Ruth!

"It's been hours since she was kidnapped. They may have taken her anywhere, even outside of London by now. And instead of searching for her, you sit here and talk gibberish about Doors!"

Inspector Campbell seemed unmoved by Ennis' passion. A bulky, almost bald man, he looked up with his colorless, sagging face, in which his eyes gleamed like two crumbs of bright brown glass.

"You're not helping me much by giving way to your emotions, Mr. Ennis," he said in his flat voice.

"Give way? Who wouldn't give way?" cried Ennis. "Don't you understand, man, it's Ruth that's gone—my wife! Why, we were married only last week in New York. And on our second day here in London, I see her whisked into a limousine and carried away before my eyes! I thought you men at Scotland Yard here would surely act, do something. Instead you talk crazy gibberish to me!"

"Those words are *not* gibberish," said Pierce Campbell quietly. "And I think they're related to the abduction of your wife."

"What do you mean? How could they be related?"

The inspector's bright little brown

"A shove sent his body scraping over the edge, and he plunged downward through dank darkness."

eyes held Ennis'. "Did you ever hear of an organization called the Brotherhood of the Door?"

Ennis shook his head, and Campbell continued, "Well, I am certain your wife was kidnapped by members of the Brotherhood."

"What kind of an organization is it?" the young American demanded. "A band of criminals?"

"No, it is no ordinary criminal organization," the detective said. His sagging face set strangely. "Unless I am mistaken, the Brotherhood of the Door is the most unholy and blackly evil organization that has ever existed on this earth. Almost nothing is known of it outside its circle. I myself in twenty years have learned little except its existence and name. That ritual I just repeated to you, I heard from the lips of a dying member of the Brotherhood, who repeated the words in his delirium."

Campbell leaned forward. "But I know that every year about this time the Brotherhood come from all over the world and

gather at some secret center here in England. And every year, before that gathering, scores of people are kidnapped and never heard of again. I believe that all those people are kidnapped by this mysterious Brotherhood."

"But what becomes of the people they kidnap?" cried the pale young American. "What do they do with them?"

INSPECTOR CAMPBELL'S bright brown eyes showed a hint of hooded horror, yet he shook his head. "I know no more than you. But whatever they do to the victims, they are never heard of again."

"But you must know something more!" Ennis protested. "What is this Door?"

Campbell again shook his head. "That too I don't know, but whatever it is, the Door is utterly sacred to the members of the Brotherhood, and whomever they mean by They Beyond the Door, they dread and venerate to the utmost."

"Where leads the Door? *It leads outside our world,*" repeated Ennis. "What can that mean?"

"It might have a symbolic meaning, referring to some secluded fastness of the order which is away from the rest of the world," the inspector said. "Or it might——"

He stopped. "Or it might what?" pressed Ennis, his pale face thrust forward.

"It might mean, literally, that the Door leads outside our world and universe," finished the inspector.

Ennis' haunted eyes stared. "You mean that this Door might somehow lead into another universe? But that's impossible!"

"Perhaps unlikely," Campbell said quietly, "but not impossible. Modern science has taught us that there are other universes than the one we live in, universes congruent and coincident with our own in space and time, yet separated from our own by the impassable barrier of totally different dimensions. It is not entirely impossible that a greater science than ours might find a way to pierce that barrier between our universe and one of those outside ones, that a Door should be opened from ours into one of those others in the infinite outside."

"A door into the infinite outside," repeated Ennis broodingly, looking past the inspector. Then he made a sudden movement of wild impatience, the dread leaping back strong in his eyes again.

"Oh, what good is all this talk about Doors and infinite universes doing in finding Ruth? I want to *do* something! If you think this mysterious Brotherhood has taken her, you must surely have some idea of how we can get her back from them? You must know something more about them than you've told."

"I don't know anything more certainly, but I've certain suspicions that amount to convictions," Inspector Campbell said. "I've been working on this Brotherhood for many years, and block after block I've narrowed down to the place I think the order's local center, the London headquarters of the Brotherhood of the Door."

"Where is the place?" asked Ennis tensely.

"It is the waterfront café of one Chandra Dass, a Hindoo, down by East India Docks," said the detective officer. "I've been there in disguise more than once, watching the place. This Chandra Dass I've found to be immensely feared by everyone in the quarter, which strengthens my belief that he's one of the high officers of the Brotherhood. He's too exceptional a man to be really running such a place."

"Then if the Brotherhood took Ruth, she may be at that place now!" cried the young American, electrified.

Campbell nodded his bald head. "She may very likely be. Tonight I'm going

there again in disguise, and have men ready to raid the place. If Chandra Dass has your wife there, we'll get her before he can get her away. Whatever way it turns out, we'll let you know at once."

"Like hell you will!" exploded the pale young Ennis. "Do you think I'm going to twiddle my thumbs while you're down there? I'm going with you. And if you refuse to let me, by heaven I'll go there myself!"

Inspector Pierce Campbell gave the haggard, fiercely determined face of the young man a long look, and then his own colorless countenance seemed to soften a little.

"All right," he said quietly. "I can disguise you so you'll not be recognized. But you'll have to follow my orders exactly, or death will result for both of us."

That strange, hooded dread flickered again in his eyes, as though he saw through shrouding mists the outline of dim horror.

"It may be," he added slowly, "that something worse even than death awaits those who try to oppose the Brotherhood of the Door—something that would explain the unearthly, superhuman dread that enwraps the secret mysteries of the order. We're taking more than our lives in our hands, I think, in trying to unveil those mysteries, to regain your wife. But we've got to act quickly, at all costs. We've got to find her before the great gathering of the Brotherhood takes place, or we'll never find her."

Two hours before midnight found Campbell and Ennis passing along a cobble-paved waterfront street north of the great East India Docks. Big warehouses towered black and silent in the darkness on one side, and on the other were old, rotting docks beyond which Ennis glimpsed the black water and gliding lights of the river.

As they straggled beneath the infrequent lights of the ill-lit street, they were utterly changed in appearance. Inspector Campbell, dressed in a shabby suit and rusty bowler, his dirty white shirt innocent of tie, had acquired a new face, a bright red, oily, eager one, and a high, squeaky voice. Ennis wore a rough blue seaman's jacket and a vizored cap pulled down over his head. His unshaven-looking face and subtly altered features made him seem a half-intoxicated seaman off his ship, as he stumbled unsteadily along. Campbell clung to him in true land-shark fashion, plucking his arm and talking wheedlingly to him.

They came into a more populous section of the evil old waterfront street, and passed fried-fish shops giving off the strong smell of hot fat, and the dirty, lighted windows of a half-dozen waterfront saloons, loud with sordid argument or merriment.

Campbell led past them until they reached one built upon an abandoned, moldering pier, a ramshackle frame structure extending some distance back out on the pier. Its window was curtained, but dull red light glowed through the glass window of the door.

A few shabby men were lounging in front of the place but Campbell paid them no attention, tugging Ennis inside by the arm.

"Carm on in!" he wheedled shrilly. "The night ain't 'alf over yet—we'll 'ave just one more."

"Don't want any more," muttered Ennis drunkenly, swaying on his feet inside. "Get away, you damned old shark."

Yet he suffered himself to be led by Campbell to a table, where he slumped heavily into a chair. His stare swung vacantly.

The café of Chandra Dass was a red-lit, smoke-filled cave with cheap black curtains on the walls and windows, and

other curtains cutting off the back part of the building from view. The dim room was jammed with tables crowded with patrons whose babel of tongues made an unceasing din, to which a three-string guitar somewhere added a wailing undertone. The waiters were dark-skinned and tiger-footed Malays, while the patrons seemed drawn from every nation east and west.

Ennis' glazed eyes saw dandified Chinese from Limehouse and Pennyfields, dark little Levantins from Soho, rough-looking Cockneys in shabby caps, a few crazily laughing blacks. From sly white faces, taut brown ones and impassive yellow ones came a dozen different languages. The air was thick with queer food-smells and the acrid smoke.

Campbell had selected a table near the back curtain, and now stridently ordered one of the Malay waiters to bring gin. He leaned forward with an oily smile to the drunken-looking Ennis, and spoke to him in a wheedling undertone.

"Don't look for a minute, but that's Chandra Dass over in the corner, and he's watching us," he said.

Ennis shook his clutching hand away. "Damned old shark!" he muttered again.

He turned his swaying head slowly, letting his eyes rest a moment on the man in the corner. That man was looking straight at him.

Chandra Dass was tall, dressed in spotless white from his shoes to the turban on his head. The white made his dark, impassive, aquiline face stand out in chiseled relief. His eyes were coal-black, large, coldly searching, as they met Ennis' bleared gaze.

Ennis felt a strange chill as he met those eyes. There was something alien and unhuman, something uncannily disturbing, behind the Hindoo's stare. He turned his gaze vacantly from Chandra Dass to the black curtains at the rear, and then back to his companion.

The silent Malay waiter had brought the liquor, and Campbell pressed a glass toward his companion. "'Ere, matey, take this."

"Don't want it," muttered Ennis, pushing it away. Still in the same mutter, he added, "If Ruth's here, she's somewhere in the back there. I'm going back and find out."

"Don't try it that way, for God's sake!" said Campbell in the wheedling undertone. "Chandra Dass is still watching, and those Malays would be on you in a minute. Wait until I give the word.

"All right, then," Campbell added in a louder, injured tone. "If you don't want it, I'll drink it myself."

He tossed off the glass of gin and set the glass down on the table, looking at his drunken companion with righteous indignation.

"Think I'm tryin' to bilk yer, eh?" he added. "That's a fine way to treat a pal!"

He added in the coaxing lower tone, "All right, I'm going to try it. Be ready to move when I light my cigarette."

He fished a soiled package of Gold Flakes from his pocket and put one in his mouth. Ennis waited, every muscle taut.

The inspector, his red, oily face still injured in expression, struck a match to his cigarette. Almost at once there was a loud oath from one of the shabby loungers outside the front of the building, and the sound of angry voices and blows.

The patrons of Chandra Dass looked toward the door, and one of the Malay waiters went hastily out to quiet the fight. But it grew swiftly, sounded in a moment like a small riot. *Crash*—someone was pushed through the front window. The excited patrons pressed toward the front. Chandra Dass pushed through

them, issuing quick orders to his servants.

For the time being the back of the café was deserted and unnoticed. Campbell sprang to his feet, and with Ennis close behind him, darted through the black curtains. They found themselves in a black corridor at the end of which a red bulb burned dimly. They could still hear the uproar.

Campbell's gun was in his hand, and the American's in his.

"We dare only stay here a few moments," the inspector cried. "Look in those rooms along the corridor here."

Ennis frantically tore open a door and peered into a dark room smelling of drugs. "Ruth!" he cried softly. "Ruth!"

2. *Death Trap*

THERE was no answer. The light in the corridor behind him suddenly went out, plunging him into pitch-black darkness. He jumped back into the dark corridor, and as he did so, heard a sudden scuffle further along it.

"Campbell!" he exclaimed, lunging forward in the black passageway. There was no answer.

He pitched forward through stygian obscurity, his hands searching ahead of him for the inspector. In the dark something whipped smoothly around his throat, tightened there like a slender, contracting tentacle.

Ennis tore frenziedly at the thing, which he felt to be a slender silken cord, but he could not loosen it. It was choking him. He tried to cry out again to Campbell, but his throat could not emit the sounds. He thrashed, twisted helplessly, hearing a loud roaring in his ears, consciousness receding. Then, dimly as though in a dream, Ennis was aware of being lowered to the floor, of being half carried and half dragged along. The constriction around his throat was gone and rapidly his brain began to clear. He opened his eyes.

He found himself lying on the floor of a room illuminated by a great hanging brass lamp of ornate design. The walls of the room were hung with rich, grotesquely worked red silk Indian draperies. His hands and feet were bound behind him, and beside him, tied in the same manner, lay Inspector Campbell. Over them stood Chandra Dass and two of the Malay servants. The faces of the servants were tigerish in their menace, but Chandra Dass' face was one of dark, impassive scorn.

"So you misguided fools thought you could deceive me so easily as that?" he said in a strong, vibrant voice. "Why, we knew hours ago that you, Inspector Campbell, and you, Mr. Ennis, were coming here tonight. We let you get this far only because it was evident that somehow you had learned too much about us, and that it would be best to let you come here and meet your deaths."

"Chandra Dass, I've men outside," rasped Campbell. "If we don't come out, they'll come in after us."

The Hindoo's proud, dark face did not change its scorn. "They will not come in for a little while, inspector. By that time you two will be dead and we shall be gone with our captives. Yes, Mr. Ennis, your wife is one of those captives," he added to the prostrate young American. "It is too bad we cannot take you and the inspector to share her glorious destiny, but then our accommodations of transport are limited."

"Ruth here?" Ennis' face flamed at the words, and he raised himself a little from the floor on his elbows.

"Then you'll let her go if I pay you? I'll raise any amount, I'll do anything you ask, if you'll set her free."

"No amount of money in the world could buy her from the Brotherhood of

the Door," answered Chandra Dass steadily. "For she belongs now, not to us, but to They Beyond the Door. Within a few hours she and many others shall stand before the Door, and They Beyond the Door shall take them."

"What are you going to do to her?" cried Ennis. "What is this damned Door and who are They Beyond it?"

"I do not think that even if I told you, your little mind would be able to accept the mighty truth," Chandra Dass said calmly. His coal-black eyes suddenly flashed with fanatic, frenetic light. "How could your poor, earth-bound little intelligences conceive the true nature of the Door and of those who dwell beyond it? Your puny brains would be stricken senseless by mere apprehension of them, They who are mighty and crafty and dreadful beyond anything on earth."

A cold wind from the alien unknown seemed to sweep the lamplit room with the Hindoo's passionate words. Then that rapt, fanatic exaltation dropped from him as suddenly as it had come, and he spoke in his ordinary vibrant tones.

"But enough of this parley with blind worms of the dust. Bring the weights!"

The last words were addressed to the Malay servants, who sprang to a closet in the corner of the room.

Inspector Campbell said steadily, "If my men find us dead when they come in here, they'll leave none of you living."

CHANDRA DASS did not even listen to him, but ordered the dark servants sharply, "Attach the weights!"

The Malays had brought from the closet two fifty-pound lead balls, and now they proceeded quickly to tie these to the feet of the two men. Then one of them rolled back the brilliant red Indian rug from the rough pine floor. A square trap-door was disclosed, and at Chandra Dass' order, it was swung upward and open.

Up through the open square came the sound of waves slap-slapping against the piles of the old pier, and the heavy odors of salt water and of rotting wood invaded the room.

"The water under this pier is twenty feet deep," Chandra Dass told the two prisoners. "I regret to give you so easy a death, but there is no opportunity to take you to the fate you deserve."

Ennis, his skin crawling on his flesh, nevertheless spoke rapidly and as steadily as possible to the Hindoo.

"Listen, I don't ask you to let me go, but I'll do anything you want, let you kill me any way you want, if you'll let Ruth——"

Sheer horror cut short his words. The Malay servants had dragged Campbell's bound body to the door in the floor. They shoved him over the edge. Ennis had one glimpse of the inspector's taut, strange face falling out of sight. Then a dull splash sounded instantly below, and then silence.

He felt hands upon himself, dragging him across the floor. He fought, crazily, hopelessly, twisting his body in its bonds, thrashing his bound limbs wildly.

He saw the dark, unmoved face of Chandra Dass, the brass lamp over his head, the red hangings. Then his head dangled over the opening, a shove sent his body scraping over the edge, and he plunged downward through dank darkness. With a splash he hit the icy water and went under. The heavy weight at his ankles dragged him irresistibly downward. Instinctively he held his breath as the water rushed upward around him.

His feet struck oozy bottom. His body swayed there, chained by the lead weight to the bottom. His lungs already

were bursting to draw in air, slow fires seeming to creep through his breast as he held his breath.

Ennis knew that in a moment or two more he would inhale the strangling waters and die. The thought-picture of Ruth flashed across his despairing mind, wild with hopeless regret. He could no longer hold his breath, felt his muscles relaxing against his will, tasted the stinging salt water at the back of his nose.

Then it was a bursting confusion of swift sensations, the choking water in his nose and throat, the roaring in his ears. A scroll of flame unrolled slowly in his brain and a voice shouted there, "You're dying!" He felt dimly a plucking at his ankles.

Abruptly Ennis' dimming mind was aware that he now was shooting upward through the water. His head burst into open air and he choked, strangled and gasped, his tortured lungs gulping the damp, heavy air. He opened his eyes, and shook the water from them.

He was floating in the darkness at the surface of the water. Someone was floating beside him, supporting him. Ennis' chin bumped the other's shoulder, and he heard a familiar voice.

"Easy, now," said Inspector Campbell. "Wait till I cut your hands loose."

"Campbell!" Ennis choked. "How did you get loose?"

"Never mind that now," the inspector answered. "Don't make any noise, or they may hear us up there."

Ennis felt a knife-blade slashing the bonds at his wrists. Then, the inspector's arm helping him, he and his companion paddled weakly through the darkness under the rotting pier. They bumped against the slimy, moldering piles, threaded through them toward the side of the pier. The waves of the flooding tide washed them up and down as Campbell led the way.

They passed out from under the old pier into the comparative illumination of the stars. Looking back up, Ennis saw the long, black mass of the house of Chandra Dass, resting on the black pier, ruddy light glowing from window-cracks. He collided with something and found that Campbell had led toward a little floating dock where some skiffs were moored. They scrambled up onto it from the water, and lay panting for a few moments.

Campbell had something in his hand, a thin, razor-edged steel blade several inches long. Its hilt was an ordinary leather shoe-heel.

The inspector turned up one of his feet and Ennis saw that the heel was missing from that shoe. Carefully Campbell slid the steel blade beneath the shoe-sole, the heel-hilt sliding into place and seeming merely the innocent heel of the shoe.

"So that's how you got loose down in the water!" Ennis exclaimed, and the inspector nodded briefly.

"That trick's done me good service before—even with your hands tied behind your back you can get out that knife and use it. It was touch and go, though, whether I could get it out and cut myself loose in the water in time enough to free you."

Ennis gripped the inspector's shoulder. "Campbell, Ruth is in there! By heaven, we've found her and now we can get her out!"

"Right!" said the officer grimly. "We'll go around to the front and in two minutes we'll be in there with my men."

THEY climbed dripping to their feet, and hastened from the little floating dock up onto the shore, through the darkness to the cobbled street.

The shabbily disguised men of Inspector Campbell were not now in front of

Chandra Dass' café, but lurking in the shadows across the street. They came running toward Campbell and Ennis.

"All right, we're going in there," Campbell exclaimed in steely tones. "Get Chandra Dass, whatever you do, but see that his prisoners are not harmed."

He snapped a word and one of the men handed pistols to him and to Ennis. Then they leaped toward the door of the Hindoo's café, from which still streamed ruddy light and the babel of many voices.

A kick from Inspector Campbell sent the door flying inward, and they burst in with guns gleaming wickedly in the ruddy light. Ennis' face was a quivering mask of desperate resolve.

The motley patrons jumped up with yells of alarm at their entrance. The hand of a Malay waiter jerked and a thrown knife thudded into the wall beside them. Ennis yelled as he saw Chandra Dass, his dark face startled, leaping back with his servants through the black curtains.

He and Campbell drove through the squealing patrons toward the back. The Malay who had thrown the knife rushed to bar the way, another dagger uplifted. Campbell's gun coughed and the Malay reeled and stumbled. The inspector and Ennis threw themselves at the black curtains—and were dashed back.

They tore aside the black folds. A dull steel door had been lowered behind them, barring the way to the back rooms. Ennis beat crazily upon it with his pistol-butt, but it remained immovable.

"No use—we can't break that down!" yelled Campbell, over the uproar. "Outside, and around to the other end of the building!"

They burst back out through that madhouse, into the dark of the street. They started along the side of the pier toward the river-end, edging forward on a narrow ledge but inches wide. As they reached the back of the building, Ennis shouted and pointed to dark figures at the end of the pier. There were two of them, lowering shapeless, wrapped forms over the end of the pier.

"There they are!" he cried. "They've got their prisoners out there with them."

Campbell's pistol leveled, but Ennis swiftly struck it up. "No, you might hit Ruth."

He and the inspector bounded forward along the pier. Fire streaked from the dark ahead and bullets thumped the rotting boards around them.

Suddenly the loud roar of an accelerated motor drowned out all other sounds. It came from the river at the pier's end.

Campbell and Ennis reached the end in time to see a long, powerful, gray motor-boat dash out into the black obscurity of the river, and roar eastward with gathering speed.

"There they go—they're getting away!" cried the agonized young American.

Inspector Campbell cupped his hands and shouted out into the darkness, "River police, ahoy! Ahoy there!"

He rasped to Ennis. "The river police were to have a cutter here tonight. We can still catch them."

With swiftly rising roar of speeded motors, a big cutter drove in from the darkness. Its searchlight snapped on, bathing the two men on the pier in a blinding glare.

"Ahoy, there!" called a stentorian voice over the roar of the motors. "Is that Inspector Campbell?"

"Yes. Come alongside," yelled the inspector, and as the big cutter shot close to the end of the pier, its reversing propellers churning the dark water to foam, Ennis and Campbell leaped.

They landed amid unseen men in the

cockpit, and as he scrambled to his feet the inspector cried, "Follow that boat that just went down-river. But no shooting!"

With thunderous drumfire from its exhausts, the cutter jerked forward so rapidly that it almost threw them from their feet again. It shot out onto the bosom of the dark river that flowed like a black sea between the banks of scattered lights that were London.

The moving lights of yachts and barges coming up-river could be seen gliding in that darkness. The captain of the cutter barked an order and one of his three men, the one crouched at the searchlight, switched its powerful beam out over the waters ahead.

In a moment it picked up a distant gray spot racing eastward on the black river, leaving a white trail of foam.

"There she is!" bawled the man at the searchlight. "She's running without lights!"

"Keep her in the searchlight," ordered the captain. "Sound our siren, and give the cutter her head."

Swaying, rocking, the cutter roared on through the darkness on the trail of that distant fleeing speck. As they raced down Blackwall Reach, the distance between the two craft had already begun to lessen.

"We're overtaking him!" cried Campbell, clutching a stanchion and peering ahead against the rush of wind and spray. "He must be making for whatever spot it is in England that is the center of the Brotherhood of the Door—but he'll never reach it."

"He said that within a few hours Ruth would go with the others through the Door!" cried Ennis, clinging beside him. "Campbell, we mustn't let them get away now!"

Pursuers and pursued flashed on down the dark, broadening river, through mazes of shipping, the cutter hanging doggedly to the motor-boat's trail. The lights of London had dropped behind and those of Tilbury now gleamed away on their left.

Bigger, stronger waves now tossed and pounded the cutter as it raced out of the river mouth toward the heaving black expanse of the sea. The Kent coast was a black blur on their right; the gray motor-boat followed it closely, grazing almost beneath the Sheerness lights.

"He's heading to round North Foreland and follow the coast south to Ramsgate or Dover," the cutter captain cried to Campbell. "But we'll catch him before he passes Margate."

The quarry was now but a quarter-mile ahead. Steadily as they roared onward the gap narrowed, until in the glare of the searchlight they could make out every detail of the powerful gray motor-boat plunging through the tossing black waves.

They saw Chandra Dass' dark face turn and look back at them, and the cutter captain raised his speaking-trumpet to his lips and shouted over the roar of motors and dash of waves.

"Stand by or we'll fire at you!"

"He won't obey," muttered Campbell between his teeth. "He knows we daren't fire with the girl in the boat."

"Yes, blast him!" exclaimed the captain. "But we'll have him in a few minutes, anyway."

The thundering chase had brought them into sight of the lights of Margate on the dark coast to their right. Now only a few hundred feet of black water separated them from the fleeing craft.

Ennis and the inspector, gripping the stanchions of the rushing cutter, saw a white figure suddenly stand erect in the boat ahead and wave its arms to them. The gray motor-boat slowed.

"It's Chandra Dass and he's signaling that he's giving up!" Ennis cried. "He's stopping!"

"By heavens, he is!" Campbell explained. "Drive alongside him, and we'll soon have the irons on him."

The cutter, its own motors hastily throttled down, shot through the water toward the slowing gray craft. Ennis saw Chandra Dass standing erect, awaiting their coming, he and the two Malays beside him holding their hands in the air. He saw a half-dozen or more white-wrapped forms in the bottom of the boat, lying motionless.

"There are their prisoners!" he cried. "Bring the boat closer so we can jump in!"

He and Campbell, their pistols out, hunched to jump as the cutter drove closer to the gray motor-boat. The sides of the two craft bumped, the motors of both idling noisily. Then before Ennis and Campbell could jump into the motor-boat, things happened with cinema-like rapidity. Two of the still white forms at the bottom of the motor-boat leaped up and like suddenly uncoiled springs shot through the air into the cutter. They were two other Malays, their dark faces flaming with fanatic light, keen daggers glinting in their upraised hands.

" 'Ware a trick!" yelled Campbell. His gun barked, but the bullet missed and a dagger slit his sleeve.

The Malays, with wild, screeching yells, were laying about them with their daggers in the cutter, insanely.

"God in heaven, they're running amok!" choked the cutter captain.

His slashed neck spurting blood and his face livid, he fell. One of his men slumped coughing beside him, another victim of the crazy daggers.

3. Up the Water-Tunnel

The man at the searchlight sprang for the maddened Malays, tugging at his pistol as he jumped. Before he got the weapon out, a dagger slashed his jugular and he went down gurgling in death. One of the Malays meanwhile had knocked Inspector Campbell from his feet, his knife-hand swooping down, his eyes blazing.

Ennis' gun roared and the bullet hit the Malay between the eyes. But as he slumped limply, the other fanatic was upon Ennis from the side. Before Ennis could whirl to meet him, the attacker's knife grazed down past his cheek like a brand of living fire. He was borne backward by the rush, felt the hot breath of the crazed Malay in his face, the dagger-point at his throat.

Shots roared quickly, one after another, and with each shot the Malay pressing Ennis back jerked convulsively. With the light of murderous madness fading from his eyes, he still strove to drive the dagger home into the American's throat. But a hand jerked him back and he lay prostrate and still.

Ennis scrambled up to find Inspector Campbell, pale and determined, over him. The detective had shot the attacker from behind.

The captain of the cutter and two of his men lay dead in the cockpit beside the two Malays. The remaining seaman, the helmsman, held his shoulder and groaned.

Ennis whirled. The motor-boat of Chandra Dass was no longer beside the cutter, and there was no sight of it anywhere on the black sea ahead. The Hindoo had taken advantage of the fight to make good his escape with his two other servants and their prisoners.

"Campbell, he's gone!" cried the young American frantically. "He's got away!"

The inspector's eyes were bright with cold flame of anger. "Yes, Chandra Dass sacrificed these two Malays to hold us up long enough for him to escape."

Campbell whirled to the helmsman. "You're not badly hurt?"

"Only a scratch, but I nearly broke my shoulder when I fell," answered the man.

"Then head on around North Foreland!" Campbell cried. "We may still be able to catch up to them."

"But Captain Wilson and the others are killed," protested the helmsman. "I've got to report——"

"You can report later," rasped the inspector. "Do as I say—I'll be responsible."

"Very well, sir," said the helmsman, and jumped back to the wheel.

In a minute the big cutter was roaring ahead over the heaving black waves, its searchlight clawing the darkness ahead. There was no sign now of the craft of Chandra Dass ahead. They raced abreast of the lights of Margate, started rounding the North Foreland, pounded by bigger seas.

Inspector Campbell had dragged the bodies of the dead policemen and their two slayers down into the cabin of the cutter. He came up and crouched down with Ennis beside Sturt, the helmsman.

"I found these on the two Malays," Campbell shouted to the American, holding out two little objects in his spray-wet hand.

Each was a flat star of gray metal in which was set a large oval, cabochon-cut jewel. The jewels flashed and dazzled with deep color, but it was a color wholly unfamiliar and alien to their eyes.

"They're not any color we know on earth," Campbell shouted. "I believe these jewels came from somewhere beyond the Door, and that these are badges of the Brotherhood of the Door."

Sturt, the helmsman, leaned toward the inspector. "We've rounded North Foreland, sir," he cried. "Head straight south along the coast," Campbell ordered. "Chandra Dass must have gone this way. No doubt he thinks he's shaken us off, and is making for the gathering-place of the Brotherhood, wherever that may be."

"The cutter isn't built for seas like this," Sturt said, shaking his head. "But I'll do it."

They were now following the coast southward, the lights of Ramsgate dropping back on their right. The waters out here in the Channel were wilder, great black waves tossing the cutter to the sky one moment, and then dropping it sickeningly the next. Frequently its screws raced loudly as they encountered no resistance but air.

Ennis, clinging precariously on the foredeck, turned the searchlight's stabbing white beam back and forth on the heaving dark sea ahead, but without any sign of their quarry disclosed.

White foam of breaking waves began to show around them like bared teeth, and there was a humming in the air.

"Storm coming up the Channel," Sturt exclaimed. "It'll do for us if it catches us out here."

"We've got to keep on," Ennis told him desperately. "We must come up with them soon!"

The coast on their right was now one of black, rocky cliffs, towering all along the shore in a jagged, frowning wall against which the waves dashed foamy white. The cutter crept southward over the wild waters, tossed like a chip upon the great waves. Sturt was having a hard time holding the craft out from the rocks, and had its prow pointed obliquely away from them.

The humming in the air changed to a shrill whistling as the outrider winds of the storm came upon them. The cutter tossed still more wildly and black masses of water smashed in upon them from the darkness, dazing and drenching them.

Suddenly Ennis yelled, "There's the lights of a boat ahead! There, moving in toward the cliffs!"

He pointed ahead, and Campbell and the helmsman peered through the blinding spray and darkness. A pair of low lights were moving at high speed on the waters there, straight toward the towering black cliffs. Then they vanished suddenly from sight.

"There must be a hidden opening or harbor of some kind in the cliffs!" Inspector Campbell exclaimed. "But that can't be Chandra Dass' boat, for it carried no lights."

"It might be others of the Brotherhood going to the meeting-place!" Ennis exclaimed. "We can follow and see."

STURT thrust his head through the flying spray and shouted, "There are openings and water-caverns in plenty along these cliffs, but there's nothing in any of them."

"We'll find out," Campbell said. "Head straight toward the cliffs in there where that boat vanished."

"If we can't find the opening we'll be smashed to flinders on those cliffs," Sturt warned.

"I'm gambling that we'll find the opening," Campbell told him. "Go ahead."

Sturt's face set stolidly and he said, "Yes, sir."

He turned the prow of the cutter toward the cliffs. Instantly they dashed forward toward the rock walls with greatly increased speed, wild waves bearing them onward like charging stallions of the sea.

Hunched beside the helmsman, the searchlight stabbing the dark wildly as the cutter was flung forward by the waves, Ennis and the inspector watched as the cliffs loomed closer ahead. The brilliant white beam struck across the rushing, mountainous waves and showed only the towering barriers of rock, battered and smitten by the raving waters that frothed white. They could hear the booming thunder of the raging ocean striking the rock.

Like a projectile hurled by a giant hand, the cutter fairly flew now toward the cliffs. They now could see even the little streams that ran off the rough rock wall as each giant wave broke against it. They were almost upon it.

Sturt's face was deathly. "I don't see any opening!" he yelled. "And we're going to hit in a moment!"

"To your left!" screamed Inspector Campbell over the booming thunder. "There's an arched opening there."

Now Ennis saw it also, a huge arch-like opening in the cliff that had been concealed by an angle of the wall. Sturt tried frantically to head the cutter toward it, but the wheel was useless as the great waves bore the craft along. Ennis saw they would strike a little to the side of the opening. The cliff loomed ahead, and he closed his eyes to the impact.

There was no impact. And as he heard a hoarse cry from Inspector Campbell, he opened his eyes.

The cutter was flying in through the mighty opening, snatched into it by powerful currents. They were whirled irresistibly forward under the huge rock arch, which loomed forty feet over their heads. Before them stretched a winding water-tunnel inside the cliff.

And now they were out of the wild uproar of the storming waters outside, and in an almost stupefying silence. Smoothly, resistlessly, the current bore them on in the tunnel, whose winding turns ahead were lit up by their searchlight.

"God, that was close!" exclaimed Inspector Campbell.

His eyes flashed. "Ennis, I believe that we have found the gathering-place of the Brotherhood. That boat we sighted is somewhere ahead in here, and so

must be Chandra Dass, and your wife."

Ennis' hand tightened on his gun-butt. "If that's so—if we can just find them——"

"Blind action won't help if we do," said the inspector swiftly. "There must be all the number of the Brotherhood's members assembled here, and we can't fight them all."

His eyes suddenly lit and he took the blazing jeweled stars from his pocket. "These badges! With them we can pose as members of the Brotherhood, perhaps long enough to find your wife."

"But Chandra Dass will be there, and if he sees us——"

Campbell shrugged. "We'll have to take that chance. It's the only course open to us."

The current of the inflowing tide was still bearing them smoothly onward through the winding water-tunnel, around bends and angles where they scraped the rock, down long straight stretches. Sturt used the motors to guide them around the turns. Meanwhile, Inspector Campbell and Ennis quickly ripped from the cutter its police-insignia and covered all evidences of its being a police craft.

Sturt suddenly snicked off the searchlight. "Light ahead there!" he exclaimed.

Around the next turn of the water-tunnel showed a gleam of strange, soft light.

"Careful, now!" cautioned the inspector. "Sturt, whatever we do, you stay in the cutter. And try to have it ready for a quick getaway, if we leave it."

Sturt nodded silently. The helmsman's stolid face had become a little pale, but he showed no sign of losing his courage.

The cutter sped around the next turn of the tunnel and emerged into a huge, softly lit cavern. Sturt's eyes bulged and Campbell uttered an exclamation of amazement. For in this mighty water-cavern there floated in a great mass, scores of sea-going craft, large and small.

All of them were capable of breasting storm and wind, and some were so large they could barely have entered. There were small yachts, big motor-cruisers, sea-going launches, cutters larger than their own, and among them the gray motor-launch of Chandra Dass.

They were massed together here, those with masts having lowered them to enter, floating and rubbing sides, quite unoccupied. Around the edges of the water-cavern ran a wide rock ledge. But no living person was visible and there was no visible source for the soft, strange white light that filled the astounding place.

"These craft must have come here from all over earth!" Campbell muttered. "The Brotherhood of the Door has assembled here—we've found their gathering-place all right."

"But where are they?" exclaimed Ennis. "I don't see anyone."

"We'll soon find out," the inspector said. "Sturt, run close to the ledge there and we'll get out on it."

Sturt obeyed, and as the cutter bumped the ledge, Campbell and Ennis leaped out onto it. They looked this way and that along it, but no one was in sight. The weirdness of it was unnerving, the strangely lit, mighty cavern, the assembled boats, the utter silence.

"Follow me," Campbell said in a low voice. "They must all be somewhere near."

He and Ennis walked a few steps along the ledge, when the American stopped. "Campbell, listen!" he whispered.

Dimly there whispered to them, as though from a distance and through great walls, a swelling sound of chanting. As they listened, hearts beating rapidly,

a square of the rock wall of the cavern abruptly flew open beside them, as though hinged like a door. Inside it was the mouth of a soft-lit, man-high tunnel, and in its opening stood two men. They wore over their clothing shroud-like, loose-hanging robes of gray, asbestos-like material. They wore hoods of the same gray stuff over their heads, pierced with slits at the eyes and mouth. And each wore on his breast the blazing star-badge.

Through the eye-slits the eyes of the two surveyed Campbell and Ennis as they halted, transfixed by the sudden apparition. Then one of the hooded men spoke measuredly in a hissing, Mongolian voice.

"Are you who come here of the Brotherhood of the Door?" he asked, apparently repeating a customary challenge.

Campbell answered, his flat voice tremorless. "We are of the Brotherhood."

"Why do you not wear the badge of the Brotherhood, then?"

For answer, the inspector reached in his pocket for the strange emblem and fastened it to his lapel. Ennis did the same.

"Enter, brothers," said the hissing, hooded shape, standing aside to let them pass.

As they stepped into the tunnel, the hooded guard added in slightly more natural tones, "Brothers, you two are late. You must hurry to get your protective robes, for the ceremony soon begins."

Campbell inclined his head without speaking, and he and Ennis started along the tunnel. Its light, as sourceless as that of the great water-cavern, revealed that it was chiseled from solid rock and that it wound downward.

When they were out of sight of the two hooded guards, Ennis clutched the detective's arm convulsively.

"Campbell, he said the ceremony begins soon! We've got to find Ruth first!"

"We'll try," the inspector answered swiftly. "Those hooded robes are apparently issued to all the members to be worn during the ceremony as protection, for some reason, and once we get robes and get them on, Chandra Dass won't be able to spot us.

"Look out!" he added an instant later. "Here's the place where the robes are issued!"

The tunnel had debouched suddenly into a wider space in which were a group of men. Several were wearing the concealing hoods and robes, and one of these hooded figures was handing out, from a large rack of the robes, three of the garments to three dark Easterners who had apparently entered in the boat just ahead of the cutter.

The three dark Orientals, their faces gleaming with strange fanaticism, quickly donned the robes and hoods and passed hurriedly on down the tunnel. At once Campbell and Ennis stepped calmly up to the hooded custodians of the robes, and extended their hands.

One of the hooded figures took down two robes and handed them to them. But suddenly one of the other hooded men spoke sharply.

Instantly all the hooded men but the one who had spoken, with loud cries, threw themselves forward on Campbell and Paul Ennis.

Taken utterly by surprize, the two had no chance to draw their guns. They were smothered by gray-robed men, held helpless before they could move, a half-dozen pistols jammed into their bodies.

Stupefied by the sudden dashing of their hopes, the detective and the young American saw the hooded man who had spoken slowly lift the concealing gray cowl from his face. It was the dark, coldly contemptuous face of Chandra Dass.

4. *The Cavern of the Door*

CHANDRA DASS spoke, and his strong, vibrant voice held a scorn that was almost pitying.

"It occurred to me that your enterprise might enable you to escape the daggers of my followers, and that you might trail us here," he said. "That is why I waited here to see if you came.

"Search them," he told the other hooded figures. "Take anything that looks like a weapon from them."

Ennis stared, stupefied, as the gray-hooded men obeyed. He was unable to believe entirely in the abrupt reversal of all their hopes, of their desperate attempt.

The hooded men took their pistols from Ennis and Campbell, and even the small gold knife attached to the chain of the inspector's big, old-fashioned gold watch. Then they stepped back, the pistols of two of them leveled at the hearts of the captives.

Chandra Dass had watched impassively. Ennis, staring dazedly, noted that the Hindoo wore on his breast a different jewel-emblem from the others, a double star instead of a single one.

Ennis' dazed eyes lifted from the blazing badge to the Hindoo's dark face. "Where's Ruth?" he asked a little shrilly, and then his voice cracked and he cried, "You damned fiend, where's my wife?"

"Be comforted, Mr. Ennis," came Chandra Dass' chill voice. "You are going now to join your wife, and to share her fate. You two are going with her and the other sacrifices through the Door when it opens. It is not usual," he added in cold mockery, "for our sacrificial victims to walk directly into our hands. We ordinarily have a more difficult time securing them."

He made a gesture to the two hooded men with pistols, and they ranged themselves close behind Campbell and Ennis.

"We are going to the Cavern of the Door," said the Hindoo. "Inspector Campbell, I know and respect your resourcefulness. Be warned that your slightest attempt to escape means a bullet in your back. You two will march ahead of us," he said, and added mockingly, "Remember, while you live you can cling to the shadow of hope, but if these guns speak, it ends even that shadow."

Ennis and Inspector Campbell, keeping their hands elevated, started at the Hindoo's command down the softly lit rock tunnel. Chandra Dass and the two hooded men with pistols followed.

Ennis saw that the inspector's sagging face was expressionless, and knew that behind that colorless mask, Campbell's brain was racing in an attempt to find a method of escape. For himself, the young American had almost forgotten all else in his eagerness to reach his wife. Whatever happened to Ruth, whatever mysterious horror lay in wait for her and the other victims, he would be there beside her, sharing it!

The tunnel wound a little further downward, then straightened out and ran straight for a considerable length. In this straight section of the rock passage, Ennis and Campbell for the first time perceived that the walls of the tunnel bore crowding, deeply chiseled inscriptions. They had not time to read them in passing, but Ennis saw that they were in many different languages, and that some of the characters were wholly unfamiliar.

"God, some of those inscriptions are in Egyptian hieroglyphics!" muttered Inspector Campbell.

The cool voice of Chandra Dass said, behind them, "There are pre-Egyptian inscriptions on these walls, inspector, could you but recognize them, carven in languages that perished from the face of earth before Egypt was born. Yes, back through time, back through mediæval

and Roman and Egyptian and pre-Egyptian ages, the Brotherhood of the Door has existed and has each year gathered in this place to open the Door and worship with sacrifices They Beyond it."

The fanatic note of unearthly devotion was in his voice now, and Ennis shuddered with a cold not of the tunnel.

As they proceeded, they heard a muffled, hoarse booming somewhere over their heads, a dull, rhythmic thunder that echoed along the long passageway. The walls of the tunnel now were damp and glistening in the sourceless soft light, tiny trickles running down them.

"You hear the ocean over us," came Chandra Dass' voice. "The Cavern of the Door lies several hundred yards out from shore, beneath the rock floor of the sea."

They passed the dark mouths of unlit tunnels branching ahead from this illuminated one. Then over the booming of the raging sea above them, there came to Ennis' ears the distant, swelling chant they had heard in the water-cavern above. But now it was louder, nearer. At the sound of it, Chandra Dass quickened their pace.

Suddenly Inspector Campbell stumbled on the slippery rock floor and went down in a heap. Instantly Chandra Dass and his two followers recoiled from them, the two pistols trained on the detective as he scrambled up.

"Do not do that again, inspector," warned the Hindoo in a deadly voice. "All tricks are useless now."

"I couldn't help slipping on this wet floor," complained Inspector Campbell.

"The next time you make a wrong step of any kind, a bullet will smash your spine," Chandra Dass told him. "Quick —march!"

The tunnel turned sharply, turned again. As they rounded the turns, Ennis saw with a sudden electric thrill of hope that Campbell held clutched in his hand, concealed by his sleeve, the heel-hilted knife from his shoe. He had drawn it when he stumbled.

Campbell edged a little closer to the young American as they were hastening onward, and whispered to him, a word at a time.

"Be—ready—to jump—them——"

"But they'll shoot, your first move——" whispered Ennis agonizedly.

Campbell did not answer. But Ennis sensed the detective's body tautening.

They came to another turn, the strong, swelling chant coming loud from ahead. They started around that turn.

Then Inspector Campbell acted. He whirled as though on a pivot, the heel-knife flashing toward the men behind them.

Shots coughed from the pistols that were pressed almost against his stomach. His body jerked as the bullets struck it, yet he remained erect, his knife stabbing with lightning rapidity.

One of the hooded men slumped down with a pierced throat, and as Campbell sprang at the other, Ennis desperately launched himself at Chandra Dass. He bore the Hindoo from his feet, but it was as though he was fighting a demon. Inside his gray robe, Chandra Dass writhed with fiendish strength.

Ennis could not hold him, the Hindoo's body seeming of spring-steel. He rolled over, dashed the young American to the floor, and leaped up, his dark face and great black eyes blazing.

Then, half-way erect, he suddenly crumpled, the fire in his eyes dulling, a call for help smothered on his lips. He fell on his face, and Ennis saw that the heel-knife was stuck in his back. Inspector Campbell jerked it out, and put it back into his shoe. And now Ennis,

staggering up, saw that Campbell had knifed the two hooded guards and that they lay in a dead heap.

"Campbell!" cried the American, gripping the detective's arm. "They've wounded you—I saw them shoot you."

Campbell's bruised face grinned briefly. "Nothing of the kind," he said, and tapped the soiled gray vest he wore beneath his coat. "Chandra Dass didn't know this vest is bullet-proof."

He darted an alert glance up and down the lighted tunnel. "We can't stay here or let these bodies lie here. They may be discovered at any moment."

"Listen!" said Ennis, turning.

The chanting from ahead swelled down the tunnel, louder than at any time yet, waxing and waxing, reaching a triumphant crescendo, then again dying away.

"Campbell, they're going on with the ceremony now!" Ennis cried. "Ruth!"

The detective's desperate glance fastened on the dark mouth of one of the branching tunnels, a little ahead.

"That side tunnel—we'll pull the bodies in there!" he exclaimed.

Taking the pistols of the dead men for themselves, they rapidly dragged the three bodies into the darkness of the unlit branching tunnel.

"Quick, on with two of these robes," rasped Inspector Campbell. "They'll give us a little better chance."

Hastily Ennis jerked the gray robe and hood from Chandra Dass' dead body and donned it, while Campbell struggled into one of the others. In the robes and concealing hoods, they could not be told from any other two members of the Brotherhood, except that the badge on Ennis' breast was the double star instead of the single one.

Ennis then spun toward the main, lighted tunnel, Campbell close behind him. They recoiled suddenly into the darkness of the branching way, as they heard hurrying steps out in the lighted passage. Flattened in the darkness against the wall, they saw several of the gray-hooded members of the Brotherhood hasten past them from above, hurrying toward the gathering-place.

"The guards and robe-issuers we saw above!" Campbell said quickly when they were passed. "Come on, now."

He and Ennis slipped out into the lighted tunnel and hastened along it after the others.

Boom of thundering ocean over their heads and rising and falling of the tremendous chanting ahead filled their ears as they hurried around the last turns of the tunnel. The passage widened, and ahead they saw a massive rock portal through whose opening they glimpsed an immense, lighted space.

Campbell and Ennis, two comparatively tiny gray-hooded figures, hastened through the mighty portal. Then they stopped. Ennis felt frozen with the dazing shock of it. He heard the detective whisper fiercely beside him.

"It's the Cavern, all right—the Cavern of the Door!"

THEY looked across a colossal rock chamber hollowed out beneath the floor of ocean. It was elliptical in shape, three hundred feet by its longer axis. Its black basalt sides, towering, rough-hewn walls, rose sheer and supported the rock ceiling which was the ocean floor, a hundred feet over their heads.

This mighty cathedral hewn from inside the rock of earth was lit by a soft, white, sourceless light like that in the main tunnel. Upon the floor of the cavern, in regular rows across it, stood hundreds on hundreds of human figures, all gray-robed and gray-hooded, all with their backs to Campbell and Ennis, looking across the cavern to its farther end.

At that farther end was a flat dais of black basalt upon which stood five hooded men, four wearing the blazing double-star on their breasts, the fifth, a triple-star. Two of them stood beside a cubical, weird-looking gray metal mechanism from which upreared a spherical web of countless fine wires, unthinkably intricate in their network, many of them pulsing with glowing force. The sourceless light of the cavern and the tunnel seemed to pulse from that weird mechanism.

Up from that machine, if machine it was, soared the black basalt wall of that end of the cavern. But there above the gray mechanism the rough wall had been carved with a great, smooth facet, a giant, gleaming black oval face as smooth as though planed and polished. Only, at the middle of the glistening black oval face, were carven deeply four large and wholly unfamiliar characters. As Ennis and Campbell stared frozenly across the awe-inspiring place, sound swelled from the hundreds of throats. A slow, rising chant, it climbed and climbed until the basalt roof above seemed to quiver to it, crashing out with stupendous effect, a weird litany in an unknown tongue. Then it began to fall.

Ennis clutched the inspector's gray-robed arm. "Where's Ruth?" he whispered frantically. "I don't see any prisoners."

"They must be somewhere here," Campbell said swiftly. "Listen——"

As the chant died to silence, on the dais at the farther end of the cavern the hooded man who wore the triple-jeweled star stepped forward and spoke. His deep, heavy voice rolled out and echoed across the cavern, flung back and forth from wall to rocky wall.

"Brothers of the Door," he said, "we meet again here in the Cavern of the Door this year, as for ten thousand years past out forefathers have met here to worship They Beyond the Door, and bring them the sacrifices They love.

"A hundred centuries have gone by since first They Beyond the Door sent their wisdom through the barrier between their universe and ours, a barrier which even They could not open from their side, but which their wisdom taught our fathers how to open.

"Each year since then have we opened the Door which They taught us how to build. Each year we have brought them sacrifices. And in return They have given us of their wisdom and power. They have taught us things that lie hidden from other men, and They have given us powers that other men have not.

"Now again comes the time appointed for the opening of the Door. In their universe on the other side of it, They are waiting now to take the sacrifices which we have procured for them. The hour strikes, so let the sacrifices be brought."

As though at a signal, from a small opening at one side of the cavern a triple file of marchers entered. A file of hooded gray members of the Brotherhood flanked on either side a line of men and women who did not wear the hoods or robes. They were thirty or forty in number. These men and women were of almost all races and classes, but all of them walked stiffly, mechanically, staring ahead with unseeing, distended eyes, like living corpses.

"Drugged!" came Campbell's shaken voice. "They're all drugged, and don't know what is going on."

Ennis' eyes fastened on a small, slender girl with chestnut hair who walked at the end of the line, a girl in a straight tan dress, whose face was white, stiff, like those of the others.

"There's Ruth!" he exclaimed frantically, his cry muffled by his hood.

He plunged in that direction, but Campbell held him back.

"No!" rasped the inspector. "You can't help her by simply getting yourself captured!"

"I can at least go with her!" Ennis exclaimed. "Let me go!"

Inspector Campbell's iron grip held him. "Wait, Ennis!" said the detective. "You've no chance that way. That robe of Chandra Dass' you're wearing has a double-star badge like those of the men up there on the dais. That means that as Chandra Dass you're entitled to be up there with them. Go up there and take your place as though you were Chandra Dass—with the hood on, they can't tell the difference. I'll slip around to that side door out of which they brought the prisoners. It must connect with the tunnels, and it's not far from the dais. When I fire my pistol from there, you grab your wife and try to get to that door with her. If you can do it, we'll have a chance to get up through the tunnels and escape."

Ennis wrung the inspector's hand. Then, without further reply, he walked boldly with measured steps up the main aisle of the cavern, through the gray ranks to the dais. He stepped up onto it, his heart racing. The chief priest, he of the triple-star, gave him only a glance, as of annoyance at his lateness. Ennis saw Campbell's gray figure slipping round to the side door.

The gray-hooded hundreds before him had paid no attention to either of them. Their attention was utterly, eagerly, fixed upon the stiff-moving prisoners now being marched up onto the dais. Ennis saw Ruth pass him, her white face an unfamiliar, staring mask.

The prisoners were ranged at the back of the dais, just beneath the great, gleaming black oval facet. The guards stepped back from them, and they remained standing stiffly there. Ennis edged a little toward Ruth, who stood at the end of that line of stiff figures. As he moved imperceptibly closer to her, he saw the two priests beside the gray mechanism reaching toward knurled knobs of ebonite affixed to its side, beneath the spherical web of pulsing wires.

The chief priest, at the front of the dais, raised his hands. His voice rolled out, heavy, commanding, reverberating again through all the cavern.

5. *The Door Opens*

"WHERE leads the Door?" rolled the chief priest's voice.

Back up to him came the reply of hundreds of voices, muffled by the hoods but loud, echoing to the roof of the cavern in a thunderous response.

"It leads outside our world!"

The chief priest waited until the echoes died before his deep voice rolled on in the ritual.

"Who taught our forefathers to open the Door?"

Ennis, edging desperately closer and closer to the line of victims, felt the mighty response reverberate about him.

"They Beyond the Door taught them!"

Now Ennis was apart from the other priests on the dais, within a few yards of the captives, of the small figure of Ruth.

"To whom do we bring these sacrifices?"

As the high priest uttered the words, and before the booming answer came, a hand grasped Ennis and pulled him back from the line of victims. He spun round to find that it was one of the other priests who had jerked him back.

"We bring them to Those Beyond the Door!"

As the colossal response thundered, the priest who had jerked Ennis back whispered urgently to him. "You go too close to the victims, Chandra Dass! Do you wish to be taken with them?"

The fellow had a tight grip on Ennis'

arm. Desperate, tensed, Ennis heard the chief priest roll forth the last of the ritual.

"Shall the Door be opened that They may take the sacrifices?"

Stunning, mighty, a tremendous shout that mingled in it worshipping awe and superhuman dread, the answer crashed back.

"Let the Door be opened!"

The chief priest turned and his upflung arms whirled in a signal. Ennis, tensing to spring toward Ruth, saw the two priests at the gray mechanism swiftly turn the knurled black knobs. Then Ennis, like all else in the vast cavern, was held frozen and spellbound by what followed.

The spherical web of wires pulsed up madly with shining force. And up at the center of the gleaming black oval facet on the wall, there appeared a spark of unearthly green light. It blossomed outward, expanded, an awful viridescent flower blooming quickly outward farther and farther. And as it expanded, Ennis saw that he could look *through* that green light! He looked through into another universe, a universe lying infinitely far across alien dimensions from our own, yet one that could be reached through this door between dimensions. It was a green universe, flooded with an awful green light that was somehow more akin to darkness than to light, a throbbing, baleful luminescence.

Ennis saw dimly through green-lit spaces a city in the near distance, an unholy city of emerald hue whose unsymmetrical, twisted towers and minarets aspired into heavens of hellish viridity. The towers of that city swayed to and fro and writhed in the air. And Ennis saw that here and there in the soft green substance of that restless city were circles of lurid light that were like yellow eyes.

In ghastly, soul-shaking apprehension of the utterly alien, Ennis knew that the yellow circles *were* eyes—that that hell-spawned city of another universe was *living*—that its unfamiliar life was single yet multiple, that its lurid eyes looked now through the Door!

Out from the insane living metropolis glided pseudopods of its green substance, glided toward the Door. Ennis saw that in the end of each pseudopod was one of the lurid eyes. He saw those eyed pseudopods come questing through the Door, onto the dais.

The yellow eyes of light seemed fixed on the row of stiff victims, and the pseudopods glided toward them. Through the open door was beating wave on wave of unfamiliar, tingling forces that Ennis felt even through the protective robe.

The hooded multitude bent in awe as the green pseudopods glided toward the victims faster, with avid eagerness. Ennis saw them reaching for the prisoners, for Ruth, and he made a tremendous mental effort to break the spell that froze him. In that moment pistol-shots crashed across the cavern and a stream of bullets smashed the pulsing web of wires!

The Door began instantly to close. Darkness crept back around the edges of the mighty oval. As though alarmed, the lurid-eyed pseudopods of that hell-city recoiled from the victims, back through the dwindling Door. And as the Door dwindled, the light in the cavern was failing.

"Ruth!" yelled Ennis madly, and sprang forward and grasped her, his pistol leaping into his other hand.

"Ennis—quick!" shouted Campbell's voice across the cavern.

The Door dwindled away altogether; the great oval facet was completely black. The light was fast dying too.

The chief priest sprang madly toward Ennis, and as he did so, the hooded

hordes of the Brotherhood recovered from their paralysis of horror and surged madly toward the dais.

"The Door is closed! Death to the blasphemers!" cried the chief priest as he plunged forward.

"Death to the blasphemers!" shrieked the crazed horde below.

Ennis' pistol roared and the chief priest went down. The light in the cavern died completely at that moment.

In the dark a torrent of bodies catapulted against Ennis, screaming vengeance. He struck out with his pistol-barrel in the mad mêlée, holding Ruth's stiff form close with his other hand. He heard the other drugged, helpless victims crushed down and trampled under foot by the surging horde of vengeance-mad members.

CLINGING to the girl, Ennis fought like a madman through a darkness in which none could distinguish friend or foe, toward the door at the side from which Campbell had fired. He smashed down the pistol-barrel on all before him, as hands sought to grab him in the dark. He knew sickeningly that he was lost in the combat, with no sense of the direction of the door.

Then a voice roared loud across the wild din, "Ennis, this way! This way, Ennis!" yelled Inspector Campbell, again and again.

Ennis plunged through the whirl of unseen bodies in the direction of the detective's shouting voice. He smashed through, half dragging and half carrying the girl, until Campbell's voice was close ahead in the dark. He fumbled at the rock wall, found the door opening, and then Campbell's hands grasped him to pull him inside.

Hands grabbed him from behind, striving to tear Ruth from him, to jerk him back. Voices shrieked for help.

Campbell's pistol blazed in the dark and the hands released their grip. Ennis stumbled with the girl through the door into a dark tunnel. He heard Campbell slam a door shut, and heard a bar fall with a clang.

"Quick, for God's sake!" panted Campbell in the dark. "They'll follow us—we've got to get up through the tunnels to the water-cavern!"

They raced along the pitch-dark tunnel, Campbell now carrying the girl, Ennis reeling drunkenly along.

They heard a mounting roar behind them, and as they burst into the main tunnel, no longer lighted but dark like the others, they looked back and saw a flickering of light coming up the passage.

"They're after us and they've got lights!" Campbell cried. "Hurry!"

It was nightmare, this mad flight on stumbling feet up through the dark tunnels where they could hear the sea booming close overhead, and could hear the wild pursuit behind.

Their feet slipped on the damp floor and they crashed into the walls of the tunnel at the turns. The pursuit was closer behind—as they started climbing the last passages to the water-cavern, the torchlight behind showed them to their pursuers and wild yells came to their ears.

They had before them only the last ascent to the water-cavern when Ennis stumbled and went down. He swayed up a little, yelled to Campbell. "Go on—get Ruth out! I'll try to hold them back a moment!"

"No!" rasped Campbell. "There's another way—one that may mean the end for us too, but our only chance!"

The inspector thrust his hand into his pocket, snatched out his big, old-fashioned gold watch.

He tore it from its chain, turned the stem of it twice around. Then he hurled

it back down the tunnel with all his force.

"Quick—out of the tunnels now or we'll die right here!" he yelled.

They lunged forward, Campbell dragging both the girl and the exhausted Ennis, and emerged a moment later into the great water-cavern. It was now lit only by the searchlight of their waiting cutter.

As they emerged into the cavern, they were thrown flat on the rock ledge by a violent movement of it under them. An awful detonation and thunderous crashing of falling rock smote their ears.

Following that first tremendous crash, giant rumbling of collapsing rock shook the water-cavern.

"To the cutter!" Campbell cried. "That watch of mine was filled with the most concentrated high-explosive known, and it's blown up the tunnels. Now it's touched off more collapses and all these caverns and passages will fall in on us at any moment!"

The awful rumbling and crashing of collapsing rock masses was deafening in their ears as they lurched toward the cutter. Great chunks of rock were falling from the cavern roof into the water.

STURT, white-faced but asking no questions, had the motor of the cutter running, and helped them pull the unconscious girl aboard.

"Out of the tunnel at once!" Campbell ordered. "Full speed!"

They roared down the water-tunnel at crazy velocity, the searchlight beam stabbing ahead. The tide had reached flood and turned, increasing the speed with which they dashed through the tunnel.

Masses of rock fell with loud splashes behind them, and all around them was still the ominous grinding of mighty weights of rock. The walls of the tunnel quivered repeatedly.

Sturt suddenly reversed the propellers, but in spite of his action the cutter smashed a moment later into a solid rock wall. It was a mass of rock forming an unbroken barrier across the water-tunnel, extending beneath the surface of the water.

"We're trapped!" cried Sturt. "A mass of the rock has settled here and blocked the tunnel."

"It can't be completely blocked!" Campbell exclaimed. "See, the tide still runs out beneath it. Our one chance is to swim out under the blocking mass of rock, before the whole cliff gives way!"

"But there's no telling how far the block may extend——" Sturt cried.

Then as Campbell and Ennis stripped off their coats and shoes, he followed their example. The rumble of grinding rock around them was now continuous and nerve-shattering.

Campbell helped Ennis lower Ruth's unconscious form into the water.

"Keep your hand over her nose and mouth!" cried the inspector. "Come on, now!"

Sturt went first, his face pale in the searchlight beam as he dived under the rock mass. The tidal current carried him out of sight in a moment.

Then, holding the girl between them, and with Ennis' hand covering her mouth and nostrils, the other two dived. Down through the cold waters they shot, and then the swift current was carrying them forward like a mill-race, their bodies bumping and scraping against the rock mass overhead.

Ennis' lungs began to burn, his brain to reel, as they rushed on in the waters, still holding the girl tightly. They struck solid rock, a wall across their way. The current sucked them downward, to a small opening at the bottom. They wedged in it, struggled fiercely, then tore through it. They rose on the other side

of it into pure air. They were in the darkness, floating in the tunnel beyond the block, the current carrying them swiftly onward.

The walls were shaking and roaring frightfully about them as they were borne round the turns of the tunnel. Then they saw ahead of them a circle of dim light, pricked with white stars.

The current bore them out into that starlight, into the open sea. Before them in the water floated Sturt, and they swam with him out from the shaking, grinding cliffs.

The girl stirred a little in Ennis' grasp, and he saw in the starlight that her face was no longer dazed.

"Paul——" she muttered, clinging close to Ennis in the water.

"She's coming back to consciousness—the water must have revived her from that drug!" he cried.

But he was cut short by Campbell's cry. "Look! Look!" cried the inspector, pointing back at the black cliffs.

In the starlight the whole cliff was collapsing, with a prolonged, terrible roar as of grinding planets, its face breaking and buckling. The waters around them boiled furiously, whirling them this way and that.

Then the waters quieted. They found they had been flung near a sandy spit beyond the shattered cliffs, and they swam toward it.

"The whole underground honeycomb of caverns and tunnels gave way and the sea poured in!" Campbell cried. "The Door, and the Brotherhood of the Door, are ended for ever!"

Lycanthropus

By C. EDGAR BOLEN

The jellied night has oozed its miry black
  From out the hills to fill the valley floor.
Atop the ragged hills the torn cloud-wrack
  Is lightning-limned into a hellish door.
    A gust of wind across the sky is hurled—
    The gods of old are loosed upon the world.

Age-old, the blood-lust wells within my throat;
  Tensely I wait, and feel my body shrink;
My hairless hide becomes a furry coat.
  Blood-hungry, through the opened door I slink;
    I raise my head and howl in horrid glee—
    And from the plain a howl comes back to me.

Mask of Death

By PAUL ERNST

A weird and uncanny tale about a strange criminal who called himself Doctor Satan, and the terrible doom with which he struck down his enemies

1. *The Dread Paralysis*

ON ONE of the most beautiful bays of the Maine coast rested the town that fourteen months before had existed only on an architect's drawing-board.

Around the almost landlocked harbor were beautiful homes, bathing-beaches, parks. On the single Main Street were model stores. Small hotels and inns were scattered on the outskirts. Streets were laid, radiating from the big hotel in the center of town like spokes from a hub. There was a waterworks and a landing-field; a power house and a library.

It looked like a year-round town, but it wasn't. Blue Bay, it was called; and it was only a summer resort. . . .

Only? It was the last word in summer resorts! The millionaires backing it had spent eighteen million dollars on it. They had placed it on a fine road to New York. They ran planes and busses to it. They were going to clean up five hundred per cent on their investment, in real estate deals and rentals.

On this, its formal opening night, the place was wide open. In every beautiful summer home all lights were on, whether the home in question was tenanted or not. The stores were open, whether or not customers were available. The inns and small hotels were gay with decorations.

But it was at the big hotel at the hub of the town that the gayeties attendant on such a stupendous opening night were at their most complete.

Every room and suite was occupied. The lobby was crowded. Formally dressed guests strolled the promenade, and tried fruitlessly to gain admission to the already overcrowded roof garden.

Here, with tables crowded to capacity and emergency waiters trying to give all the de luxe service required, the second act of the famous Blue Bay floor show was going on.

In the small dance floor at the center of the tables was a dancer. She was doing a slave dance, trying to free herself from chains. The spotlight was on; the full moon, pouring its silver down on the open roof, added its blue beams.

The dancer was excellent. The spectators were enthralled. One elderly man, partially bald, a little too stout, seemed particularly engrossed. He sat alone at a ringside table, and had been shown marked deference all during the evening. For he was Mathew Weems, owner of a large block of stock in the Blue Bay summer resort development, and a very wealthy man.

Weems was leaning forward over his

"The wall behind the spot where he had been disappeared."

table, staring at the dancer with sensual lips parted. And she, quite aware of his attention and his wealth, was outdoing herself.

A prosaic scene, one would have said. Opening night of a resort de luxe; wealthy widower concentrating on a dancer's whirling bare body; people applauding carelessly. But the scene was to become far indeed from prosaic—and the cause of its change was to be Weems.

AMONG the people standing at the roof-garden entrance and wishing they could crowd in, there was a stir. A woman walked among them.

She was tall, slender but delicately voluptuous, with a small, shapely head on a slender, exquisite throat. The pallor of her clear skin and the largeness of her intensely dark eyes made her face look like a flower on an ivory stalk. She was gowned in cream-yellow, with the curves

of a perfect body revealed as her graceful walk molded her frock against her.

Many people looked at her, and then, questioningly, at one another. She had been registered at the hotel only since late afternoon, but already she was an object of speculation. The register gave her name as Madame Sin, and the knowing ones had hazarded the opinion that she, and her name, were publicity features to help along with the resort opening news.

Madame Sin entered the roof garden, with the assurance of one who has a table waiting, and walked along the edge of the small dance floor. She moved silently, obviously not to distract attention from the slave dance. But as she walked, eyes followed her instead of the dancer's beautiful moves.

She passed Weems' table. With the eagerness of a man who has formed a slight acquaintance and would like to make it grow, Weems rose from his table and bowed. The woman known as Madame Sin smiled a little. She spoke to him, with her exotic dark eyes seeming to mock. Her slender hands moved restlessly with the gold-link purse she carried. Then she went on, and Weems sat down again at his table, with his eyes resuming their contented scrutiny of the dancer's convolutions.

The dancer swayed toward him, struggling gracefully with her symbolic chains. Weems started to raise a glass of champagne abstractedly toward his lips. He stopped, with his hand half-way up, eyes riveted on the dancer. The spotlight caught the fluid in his upraised glass and flicked out little lights in answer.

The dancer whirled on. And Weems stayed as he was, staring at the spot where she had been, glass poised half-way between the table and his face, like a man suddenly frozen—or gripped by an abrupt thought.

The slave-girl whirled on. But now as she turned, she looked more often in Weems' direction, and a small frown of bewilderment began to gather on her forehead. For Weems was not moving; strangely, somehow disquietingly, he was staying just the same.

Several people caught the frequence of her glance, and turned their eyes in the same direction. There were amused smiles at the sight of the stout, wealthy man seated there with his eyes wide and unblinking, and his hand raised half-way between table and lips. But soon those who had followed the dancer's glances saw, too. Weems was holding that queer attitude too long.

The dancer finished her almost completed number and whirled to the dressing-room door. The lights went on. And now everyone near Weems was looking at him, while those farther away were standing in order to see the man.

He was still sitting as he had been, as if frozen or paralyzed, with staring eyes glued to the spot where the dancer had been, and with hand half raised holding the glass.

A FRIEND got up quickly and hastened to the man's table.

"Weems," he said sharply, resting his hand on the man's shoulder.

Weems made no sign that he had heard, or had felt the touch. On and on he sat there, staring at nothing, hand half raised to drink.

"Weems!" Sharp and frightened the friend's voice sounded. And all on the roof garden heard it. For all were now silent, staring with gradually more terrified eyes at Weems.

The friend passed his hand slowly, haltingly before Weems' staring eyes. And those eyes did not blink.

"Weems—for God's sake—what's the matter with you?"

The friend was trembling now, with

growing horror on his face as he sensed something here beyond his power to comprehend. Hardly knowing what he was doing, following only an instinct of fear at the unnatural attitude, he put his hand on Weems' half-raised arm and lowered it to the table. The arm went down like a mechanical thing. The champagne glass touched the table.

A woman at the next table screamed and got to her feet with a rasp of her chair that sounded like a thin shriek of fear. For Weems' arm, when it was released, went slowly up again to the same position it had assumed when the man suddenly ceased becoming an animate being, and became a thing like a statue clad in dinner clothes with a glass in its hand.

"Weems!" yelled the friend.

And then the orchestra began to play, loudly, with metallic cheerfulness, as the head waiter sensed bizarre tragedy and moved to conceal it as such matters are always concealed at such occasions.

Weems sat on, eyes wide, hand half raised to lips. He continued to hold that posture when four men carried him to the elevators and down to the hotel doctor's suite. He was still holding it when they sat him down in an easy chair, bent forward a bit as though a table were still before him, eyes staring, hand half raised to drink. The champagne glass was empty now, with its contents spotting his clothes and the roof garden carpets, spilled when the four had borne him from the table. But it was still clenched in his rigid hand, and no effort to get it from his oddly set fingers was successful. . . .

THE festivities of the much-heralded opening night went on all over the new-born town of Blue Bay. On the roof garden were several hundred people who were still neglecting talk, drinking and dancing while their startled minds reviewed the strange thing they had seen; but aside from their number, the celebrants were having a careless good time, with no thought of danger in their minds.

However, there was no sign of gayety in the tower office suite atop the mammoth Blue Bay Hotel and just two floors beneath the garden. The three officers of the Blue Bay Company sat in here, and in their faces was frenzy.

"What in the world are we going to do?" bleated Chichester, thin, nervous, dry-skinned, secretary and treasurer of the company. "Weems is the biggest stockholder. He is nationally famous. His attack of illness here on the very night of opening will give us publicity so unfavorable that it might put Blue Bay in the red for months. You know how a disaster can sometimes kill a place."

"Most unfortunate," sighed heavy-set, paunchy Martin Gest, gnawing his lip. Gest was president of the company.

"Unfortunate, hell!" snapped Kroner, vice president. Kroner was a self-made man, slightly overcolored, rather loud, with dinner clothes cut a little too modishly. "It's curtains if anything more should happen."

"Hasn't the doctor found out yet what's the matter with Weems?" quavered Chichester.

Kroner swore. "You heard the last report, same as the rest of us. Doctor Grays has never seen anything like it. Weems seems to be paralyzed; yet there are none of the symptoms of paralysis save lack of movement. There is no perceptible heartbeat—yet he certainly isn't dead; the complete absence of rigor mortis and the fact that there is a trace of blood circulation prove that. He simply stays in that same position. When you move arm or hand, it moves slowly back to the same position again on being released. He has no reflex response, doesn't apparently hear or feel or see."

"Like catalepsy," sighed Gest.

Kroner nodded and moistened his feverish lips.

"Just like catalepsy. Only it isn't. Grays swears to that. But what it is, he can't say."

Chichester fumbled in his pocket.

"You two laughed at me this evening when I got worried about getting that note. You talked me down again a few minutes ago. But I'm telling you once more, I believe there's a connection. I believe whoever wrote the note really has made Weems like he is—not that the note was penned by a crank and that Weems' illness is coincidence."

"Nonsense!" said Gest. "The note was either written by a madman, or by some crook who adopted a crazy, melodramatic name."

"But he predicted what happened to Weems," faltered Chichester. "And he says there will be more—much more—enough to ruin Blue Bay for ever if we don't meet his demands——"

"Nuts!" said Kroner bluntly. "Weems just got sick, that's all. Something so rare that most doctors can't spot it, but normal just the same. We can keep it quiet, and have him treated secretly by Grays. That'll stop publicity."

He rapped with heavy, red knuckles on the note which Chichester had laid on the conference table. "This is a fraud, a thin-air idea of some small shot to get money out of us."

He turned to the telephone to call Doctor Grays' suite again for a later report on Weems' condition. The other two bent near to listen.

A breath of air came in the open window. It stirred the note on the table, partially unfolded it.

". . . disaster and horror shall be the chief, though uninvited, guests at your opening unless you comply with my request. Mathew Weems shall be only the first if you do not signify by one a. m. whether or not you will meet my demand. . . ."

The note closed as the breeze died, flipped open again so that the signature showed, flipped shut once more.

The signature was: Doctor Satan!

2. *The Living Dead*

At two in the morning, two hours and a half after the odd seizure of Mathew Weems, and while Gest and Kroner and Chichester were in Doctor Grays' suite anxiously looking at the stricken man, eight people were in the sleek, small roulette room of the Blue Bay Hotel on the fourteenth floor.

The eight, four men and four women, were absorbed by the wheel. Their bets were scattered over the numbered board, and some of the bets were high.

The croupier, with all bets placed, spun the little ivory ball into the already spinning wheel, and all watched. At the door, a woman stood. She was tall, slender but voluptuously proportioned, with a face like a pale flower on her long, graceful throat. Madame Sin.

She came into the room with a little smile on her red, red lips. In her tapering fingers was held a gold-link purse. She did not open this to buy chips, simply walked to the table. There, with a smile, two men moved over a little to make a place for her.

"Thank you so much," she acknowledged the move. Her voice was as exotically attractive as the rest of her; low, clear, a little throaty. "I am merely going to watch a little while, however. I do not intend to play."

The wheel stopped. The ball came to rest in the slot marked nineteen. But the attention of those at the table was divided between it and the woman who was outrageous enough, or had sense of humor

enough, to call herself Madame Sin. In the men's eyes was admiration. In the women's eyes was the wariness that always appears when another woman comes along whose attractions are genuinely dangerous to male peace of mind.

"Make your plays," warned the croupier dispassionately, holding the ball between pallid thumb and forefinger while he prepared to spin the wheel again.

The four couples placed bets. Madame Sin watched out of dark, exotic eyes. She turned slowly, with her gold-link purse casually held in her left hand; turned so that she made a complete, leisurely circle, as though searching for someone. Then, with her red lips still shaped in a smile, she faced the table again.

The croupier spun the wheel, snapped the ball into it. The eight players leaned to watch it. . . .

And in that position they remained. There was no movement of any sort from any one of them. It was as though they had been frozen to blocks of ice by a sudden blast of the cold of outer space; or as though a motion picture had been stopped on its reel so that abruptly it became a still-life, with all the actors in mid-move and with half-formed expressions on their faces.

A tall blond girl was bent far over the table, with her left hand hovering over her bet, on number twenty-nine. Beside her a man had a cigarette in his lips and a lighter in his left hand which he had been about to flick. Two other men were half facing each other with the lips of one parted for a remark he had begun to make. The rest of the eight were gazing at the wheel with arms hanging beside them.

And exactly in these positions they remained, for minute after minute.

During that time Madame Sin looked at them; and her smile now was a thing to chill the blood. You couldn't have told why. Her face was as serene-looking as ever, and there were no tangible lines of cruelty in evidence in her face. Yet she looked like a she-fiend as she stared around.

She walked to the croupier, who stood gazing at his wheel, with his mouth open in the beginning of a yawn.

Down the hall came the clang of elevator doors, and the sound of laughter and voices. Madame Sin glided toward the door. There she paused, then went purposefully back to the table. She went swiftly from one to another of the frozen, stark figures in their life-like but utterly rigid positions, then back to the door.

Smiling, she left the room, passing five or six people who were about to enter it for a little gambling. She was almost to the elevator shafts when she heard a woman's scream knife the air, followed by a man's hoarse shout that expressed almost as much horror as the scream had done.

Still smiling, utterly composed, she stepped into an elevator—and the elevator boy shivered a bit as he stared at her. He had not heard the scream, did not know that anything was wrong. He only knew that something in this lovely woman's smile sent cold fingers up and down his spine.

IT WAS a grim, white-faced trio that sat in the conference room of the Blue Bay Hotel at eleven next morning.

Chichester nor Gest nor Kroner—none had had a moment's sleep all night. They had been in Doctor Grays' suite with Weems when a shivering man—a well-known young clubman, too, which was unfortunate—stumbled up to tell of the dreadful thing to be seen in the roulette room.

With horror mounting in their breasts,

half knowing already what they would see, the three had gone there.

Nine more, counting the croupier, in a state like that which Weems was in! Nine more people with all life, all movement, arrested in mid-motion! Ten now with some kind of awful paralysis gripping them in which they did not move nor seemingly breathe—ten who were dead by every test known to science, but who, as even laymen could see at a glance, were yet indubitably alive!

"Blue Bay Development is ruined," ground out Kroner. It had been said a dozen times by every one of the three; but the words made the other two look at him in frantic denial just the same.

"If we can keep it quiet—just for a little while—just until——"

"Until what?" snapped Kroner. "If we only had an idea when this mysterious sickness would leave these people! We could stall the news perhaps for a day, or even two days—*if* we could have some assurance that at the end of twenty-four or forty-eight hours they'd be all right again. But we haven't. They may be like that for months before they die—may even die in a few hours. Grays can't tell. This is all beyond his medical experience. So it seems to me we might as well make public announcements now, face ruin on the resort development, and get it over with."

Chichester spoke, almost in a whisper.

"This Doctor Satan, whoever he is, gives us assurance in his note. He says that if we pay what he demands, the ten will recover, and everything will be all right."

"And if we pay what he demands, we'll be ruined just the same as though we'd been killed by publicity," objected Gest.

Kroner glared at the wizened treasurer.

"I'm surprized you'd even suggest that, Chichester. But you've not only suggested it—you've pled for it all night long! Do you get a cut from Doctor Satan or something?"

"Gentlemen," soothed Gest, as Chichester half rose from his chair. "We're in too serious a jam to indulge in petty quarrels. We've got to decide what to do——"

"I move we call in the police," growled Kroner. "I still can't believe that any human being could induce such a state of catalepsy, or living death, or whatever you want to call it, in other human beings. Not unless he's a wizard or something. Nevertheless, in view of this threat note from Doctor Satan, there may be a definite criminal element here that the cops should know about."

"Let's wait on the police," objected Gest. "We have already done better than that in summoning this Ascott Keane to help us."

Chichester's dry skin flushed faintly.

"I still say that that was a stupid move!" he snapped. "Ascott Keane? Who is he, anyhow? He has no reputation for detective work or any other kind of work. A rich man's son—loafer—dilettante. What we should have done was contact Doctor Satan after his first note, after Weems was stricken. Then we would have saved the nine in the roulette room, and at the same time saved our project here."

"You'd pay this crook our entire surplus?" snarled Kroner. "You'd give him a million eight hundred thousand in cold cash, when you don't even know that he has had a hand in what ails the ten?"

"It's worth a million eight hundred thousand to save our stake in Blue Bay," said Chichester obstinately. "As for Doctor Satan's having a hand in the horrible fate of Weems and the rest—he told you beforehand that it would happen, didn't he?"

"Please," sighed Gest as for a second time the florid vice-president and the

wizened treasurer snarled at each other. "We——"

The door of the office suite banged open. The assistant manager of the hotel staggered into the room. His blue eyes were blazing with excitement. His youngish face was contorted with it.

"I've just found out something that I think is of vital importance!" he gasped. "Something in the roulette room! I've been in there all night, as you know, looking around to see if I could find poison needles fastened to table or chairs, or anything like that, and quite by chance I noticed something else. The maddest thing! The roulette wheel! It's——"

He stopped.

"Go on, go on!" urged Kroner. "What about the roulette wheel? And what possible connection could it have with what happened to the people in that room?"

He stared at the young assistant manager, as did Gest and Chichester, with his hands clenched with suspense.

And the assistant manager slowly, like a falling tree, pitched forward on his face.

"My God——"

"What happened to him?"

The three got to him together. They rolled him over, lifted his head, began chafing his hands. But it was useless. And in a moment that was admitted in their faces as they looked at each other.

"Another victory for Doctor Satan," whispered Chichester, shuddering as though with palsy. "He's—dead!"

Gest opened his mouth as though to deny it, but closed his lips again. For palpably the assistant manager was dead, struck down an instant before he could tell them some vital news he had uncovered. He had died as though struck by lightning, at just the right time to save disclosure. It was as though the being who called himself Doctor Satan were there, in that office, and had acted to protect himself!

Shivering, Chichester glanced fearfully around. And Gest said: "God—if Ascott Keane were here——"

3. *The Stopped Watch*

Down at the lobby door, a long closed car slid to a stop. From it stepped two people. One was a tall, broad-shouldered man with a high-bridged nose, long, strong jaw, and pale gray eyes under heavy black eyebrows. The other was a girl, equally tall for her sex, beautifully formed, with reddish brown hair and dark blue eyes.

The two walked to the registration desk in the lobby.

"Ascott Keane," the man signed. "And secretary, Beatrice Dale."

"Your suite is ready for you, Mr. Keane," the clerk said obsequiously. "But we had no word of your secretary's coming. Shall we——"

"A suite for her on the same floor if possible," Keane said crisply. "Is Mr. Gest in the hotel?"

"Yes, sir. He is in the tower office."

"Have the boy take my things up. I'll go to the office first. Send word up there what suite you've given Miss Dale."

Keane nodded to Beatrice, and walked to the elevators.

"Secretary!" snorted the key clerk to the head bellhop. "What's he want a secretary for? He's never done any work in his life. Inherited umpteen million bucks, and plays around all the time. Wish I was Ascott Keane."

The head bellhop nodded. "Pretty soft for him, all right. Hardest job he has is to clip coupons. . . ."

Which would have made Keane smile a little if he could have heard, for the clerk and the bellhop shared the opinion of him held by the rest of the world; an

opinion he carefully fostered. Few knew of his real interest in life, which was that of criminal detection.

He tensed as he swung into the anteroom of the office suite. Gest, one of the rare persons who knew of his unique detective work, had babbled something of a Doctor Satan when he phoned long distance. Doctor Satan! The mention of that name was enough to bring Keane instantly from wherever he was, with his powers pitched to their highest and keenest point in an effort to crush at last the unknown individual who lived for outlawed thrills.

As soon as he opened the door, it was apparent that something was wrong. There was no one sitting at the information desk, and from closed doors beyond came the hum of excited voices.

Keane went to the door where the hum sounded loudest and opened that.

He stared in at three men bending over a fourth who lay on the floor, stark and motionless — obviously dead! Keane strode to them.

"Who are you, sir?" grated Kroner. "What the devil——"

"Keane!" breathed Gest. "Thank God you're here! There has just been a murder. I'm sure it's murder—though how it was done, and who did it, are utterly beyond me."

"This is your Ascott Keane?" said Kroner, in a slightly different tone. His eyes gained a little respect as they rested on Keane's light gray, icily calm eyes.

"Yes. Keane—Kroner, vice president. And this is Chichester, treasurer and secretary."

Keane nodded, and stared at the dead man.

"And this?"

"Wilson, assistant manager. He came in a minute or two ago, saying he had something of the utmost importance to tell us about the players in the roulette room. . . ."

Keane nodded. He had been told of that just before he took a plane for Blue Bay. Gest swallowed painfully and went on:

"Wilson had just started to explain. He said something about the roulette wheel, and then fell dead. Literally. He fell forward on his face as though he had been shot. But he wasn't. There isn't a mark on his body. And he couldn't have been poisoned before he came in here. No poison could act so exactly, striking at the precise second to keep him from disclosing his find."

"Doctor's report?" said Keane.

"Grays, house physician, is on his way up now. We sent the information girl to get him. Didn't want to telephone. You know how these things spread. We didn't want the switchboard girls to hear of this just yet."

Keane's look of acknowledgment was grim.

"The publicity. Of course. We'll have to move fast to save Blue Bay."

"If you can save it, now," muttered Chichester.

The door opened, and Doctor Grays stepped in, with consternation in his brown eyes as he saw the man on the floor.

They left him to examine the body, and the three officials told Keane all the details they knew of the strange tragedy that had overtaken Weems and, two and a half hours later, the nine in the roulette room.

They returned to the conference room. Grays faced them.

"Wilson died of a heart attack," he said. "The symptoms are unmistakable. His death seems normal. . . ."

"Normal — but beautifully timed," murmured Keane.

"Right," nodded the doctor. "We'll want an autopsy at once. The police are on their way here. They're indirectly in our employ, as are all in Blue Bay; but they won't be able to keep this out of the papers for very long!"

"Where are Weems and the rest?"

"In my suite."

"I'd like to see them, please."

In Doctor Grays' suite, Keane stared with eyes that for once had lost some of their calm, at the weird figures secluded in the bedroom. This room was kept locked against the possibility of a chambermaid or other hotel employee coming in by mistake. An unwarned person might well have gone at least temporarily insane at the sudden sight of the ten in that bedroom.

In a chair near the door sat Weems. He was bent forward a little as though leaning over a table. He stared unwinkingly at space. In his hand was still a champagne glass, raised near his lips.

Standing around the room were the nine others, each in the position he or she had been in when rigidity overtook them in the roulette room. They stared wide-eyed ahead of them, motionless, expressionless. It was like walking into a waxworks museum, save that these statuesque figures were of flesh and blood, not wax.

"They're all dead as far as medical tests show," Grays said. There was awe and terror in his voice. "Yet—they're not dead! A child could tell that at a glance. I don't know what's wrong."

"Why don't you put them to bed?" said Keane.

"We can't. Each of the ten seems to be in some kind of spell that makes it impossible for his body to take any but that one position. We've laid them down—and in a moment they're up again and in the former position, moving like sleepwalkers, like dead things! Look."

He gently pulled Weems' arm down. Slowly, it raised again till the champagne glass was near his lips. Meanwhile the man's eyes did not even blink. He was as oblivious of the touch as if really dead.

"Horrible!" quavered Chichester. "Maybe it's some new kind of disease."

"I think not," said Keane, voice soft but bleak. He looked at a night table, heaped with jewelry, handkerchiefs, wallets, small change. "That collection?"

"The personal effects of these people," said Gest, wiping sweat from his pale face.

Keane went to the pile, and sorted it over. He was struck at once by a curious lack. He couldn't place it for an instant; then he did.

"Their watches!" he said. "Where are they?"

"Watches?" said Gest. "I don't know. Hadn't thought of it."

"There are ten people here," said Keane. "And only one watch! Normally at least eight of them would have had them, including the women with their jeweled trinkets. But there's only one. . . . Do you remember who owned this, and where he wore it?"

He picked up the watch, a man's with no chain.

"That's Weems' watch. He had it in his trousers pocket."

"Odd place for it," said Keane. "I see it has stopped."

He wound the watch. But the little second hand did not move, and he could only turn the winding-stem a little, proving that it had not run down.

The hands said eleven thirty-one.

"That was the time Weems was—paralyzed?" said Keane.

Gest nodded. "Funny. His watch stopped just when he did!"

"Very funny," said Keane expressionlessly. "Send this to a jeweler right away and have him find out what's wrong with it. Now, you say your assistant

manager was struck dead just as he said something about the roulette wheel?"

"Yes," said Gest. "It was as though this Doctor Satan were right there with us and killed him with a soundless bullet just before he could talk."

Keane's eyes glittered.

"I'd like to look over the roulette room."

"The police are here," said Grays, turning from his phone.

Keane stared at Gest. "Keep them out of the roulette room for a few minutes."

He strode out to the elevators. . . .

His first concern, after locking himself into the room where nine people had been stricken with something which, if it persisted, was worse than any death, was the thing the assistant manager had mentioned before death hit him. The roulette wheel.

He bent over this, with a frown of concentration on his face. And his quick eyes caught at once a thing another person might have overlooked for quite a while.

The wheel was dish-shaped, as all roulette wheels are. In its rounded bottom were numbered slots, where the little ivory ball was to end its journey and proclaim gambler's luck.

But the little ball was not in one of the bottom slots!

The tiny ivory sphere was half up the rounded side of the wheel, like a pea clinging alone high up on the slant of a dish!

An exclamation came from Keane's lips. He stared at the ball. What in heaven's name kept it from rolling down the steep slant and into the rounded bottom? Why would a sphere stay on a slant? It was as if a bowl of water had been tilted—and the water's surface had taken and retained the tilt of the vessel it was in instead of remaining level!

He lifted the ball from the sloping side of the wheel. It came away freely, but with an almost intangible resistance, as if an unseen rubber band held it. When he released it, it went back to the slope. He rolled it down to the bottom of the wheel. Released, it rolled back up to its former position, like water running up-hill.

Keane felt a chill touch him. The laws of physics broken! A ball clinging to a slant instead of rolling down it! What dark secret of nature had Doctor Satan mastered now?

But the query was not entirely unanswered in his mind. Already he was getting a vague hint of it. And a little later the hint was broadened.

The phone rang. He answered it.

"Mr. Keane? This is Doctor Grays. The autopsy on Wilson has been begun, and already a queer thing has been disclosed. It's about his heart."

"Yes," said Keane, gripping the phone.

"His heart is ruptured in a hundred places—as though a little bomb had exploded in it! Don't ask me why, because I can't even give a theory. It's unique in medical history."

"I won't ask you why," Keane said slowly. "I think—in a little while—I'll tell you why."

He hung up and strode toward the door. But at the roulette table he paused and stared at the wheel with his gray eyes icily blazing.

It seemed to him the wheel had moved a little!

He had unconsciously lined up the weirdly clinging ball with the knob on the outer door, as he examined it awhile ago. Now, as he stood in the same place, the ball was not quite in that line. As if the wheel had rotated a fraction of an inch!

"Yes, I think that's it," he whispered, with his face a little paler than usual.

And a little later the words changed in his brain to: "I *know* that's it. A fiend's genius. . . . This is the most dangerous thing Doctor Satan has yet mastered!"

He was talking on the phone to the jeweler to whom Weems' watch had been sent.

"What did you do to that watch?" the jeweler was saying irritably.

"Why?" parried Keane.

"There doesn't seem to be anything wrong with it. And yet it simply won't go. And I can't make it go."

"There's nothing wrong with it at all?"

"As far as I can find out—no."

KEANE hung up. He had been studying for the dozenth time the demand note Doctor Satan had written the officials:

"Gentlemen of the Blue Bay Development: This is to request that you pay me the sum of one million, eight hundred and two thousand, five hundred and forty dollars and forty-eight cents at a time and place to be specified later. As a sample of what will happen if you disregard this note, I shall strike at one of your guests, Mathew Weems, within a few minutes after you read this. I guarantee that disaster and horror shall be the chief, though uninvited, guests at your opening unless you comply with my request. Mathew Weems shall be only the first if you do not signify by one a. m. whether or not you will meet my demand. DOCTOR SATAN."

Keane gave the note back to Blue Bay's police chief, who fumbled uncertainly with it for a moment and then stuck it in his pocket. Normally a competent man, he was completely out of his depth here.

One man with a heart that seemed to have been exploded internally; ten people who were dead, yet lived, and who stood or sat like frozen statues. . . .

He looked pleadingly at Ascott Keane, whom he had never heard of but who wore authority and competence like a mantle. But Keane said nothing to him.

"An odd extortion amount," he said to Gest. "One million, eight hundred and two thousand, five hundred and forty dollars and forty-eight cents! Why not an even figure?"

He was talking more to himself than to the president of Blue Bay. But Gest answered readily.

"That happens to be the precise sum of the cash reserve of Blue Bay Development."

Keane glanced at him sharply. "Is your financial statement made public?"

Gest shook his head. "It's strictly confidential. Only the bank, and ourselves, know that cash reserve figure. I can't imagine how this crook who signs himself Doctor Satan found it out."

4. The Shell

THE house was serene and beautiful on the bay shore. The sun beat back from its white walls, and glanced in at the windows of the rear terrace. It shone on a grotesque figure there; a man with the torso of a giant, but with no legs—a figure that hitched itself along on the backs of calloused hands, using muscular arms as a means of locomotion.

But this figure was not as bizarre as the one to be found within the house, behind shades drawn to keep out any prying eyes.

Here, in a dim room identifiable as a library, a tall man stood beside a flat-topped desk. But all that could be told of the figure was that it was male. For it was cloaked from heels to head in a red mantle. The hands were covered by red rubber gloves. The face was concealed by a red mask, and over the head was drawn a red skull-cap with two small projections in mocking imitation of Lucifer's horns.

Doctor Satan!

In the red-gloved hands was a woman's gold-link purse. Doctor Satan opened it. From the purse he drew a thing that defied analysis and almost defied description.

It was of metal. It seemed to be a model in gleaming steel of a problem in solid geometry: it was an angular small cage, an inch wide by perhaps three and a half inches square. That is, at first it seemed square. But a closer look revealed that no two corresponding sides of the little cage were quite parallel. Each angle, each line was subtly different.

Doctor Satan pointed it at the library wall. The end he pointed was a trifle wider than the end heeled in the palm of his hand. On this wider end was one bar that was fastened only at one end. The red-covered fingers moved this bar experimentally, slowly, so that it formed a slightly altered angle with the sides. . . .

The library wall was mist, then nothingness. The street outside was not a street. A barren plain stood there, strewn with rocky shale, like a landscape on the moon.

The little bar was moved back, and the library wall was once more in place. A chuckle came from the red-masked lips; a sound that would have made a hearer shiver a little. Then it changed to a snarl.

"Perfect! But again Ascott Keane interferes. This time I've got to succeed in removing him. An exploded heart. . . ."

He put the mysterious small cage back in the gold-link purse, and opened the desk drawer. From it he took a business letterhead. It was a carbon copy, with figures on it.

"Bostiff. . . ."

On the rear terrace the legless giant stirred at the call. He moved on huge arms to the door and into the library. . . .

In his tower suite, Keane paced back and forth with his hands clasped behind him. Beatrice Dale watched him with quiet, intelligent eyes. He was talking, not to her, but to himself; listing aloud the points uncovered since his arrival here.

"A few seconds after talking with Madame Sin, Weems was stricken. Also, the lady with the odd name was seen coming from the roulette room at about the time when a party entered and found the croupier and eight guests turned from people into statues. But she was nowhere around when Wilson died in the conference room."

He frowned. "The watches were taken from all the sufferers from this strange paralysis, save Weems. By whom? Madame Sin? Weems' watch is absolutely in good order, but it won't run. The ball on the roulette wheels stays on a slant instead of rolling down into a slot as it should when the wheel is motionless. But the wheel doesn't seem to be quite motionless. It apparently moved a fraction of an inch in the forty-five minutes or so that I was in the room."

"You're sure you didn't touch it, and set it moving?" said Beatrice. "Those wheels are delicately balanced."

"Not that delicately! I barely brushed it with my fingers as I examined the ivory ball. No, I didn't move it. But I'm sure it did move. . . ."

There was a tap at the door. He went to it. Gest was in the corridor.

"Here's the master key," he said, extending a key to Keane. "I got it from the manager. But—you're sure it is necessary to enter Madame Sin's rooms?"

"Very," said Keane.

"She is in now," said the president. "Could you—just to avoid possible scandal—inasmuch as you don't intend to knock before entering——"

He glanced at Beatrice. Keane smiled.

"I'll have Miss Dale go in first. If Madame Sin is undressed or—entertaining—Miss Dale can apologize and retreat. But I am sure Madame Sin will be unaware of intrusion. In spite of the conviction of your key clerk that she is in, I am quite sure that, at least figuratively, she is out."

"*Figuratively* out?" echoed Gest. "I don't understand."

"You will later—unless this is my fated time to lose in the fight I have made against the devil who calls himself Doctor Satan. Are Chichester and Kroner in the hotel?"

Gest shook his head.

"Kroner is in the Turkish bath two blocks down the street. Chichester went home ten minutes ago."

"Madame Sin will be unaware of intrusion," Keane repeated enigmatically and with seeming irrelevance.

He turned to Beatrice, and the two went to the woman's rooms.

KEANE softly closed Madame Sin's hall door behind him after Beatrice had entered first and reported that the woman was alone and in what seemed a deep sleep. At first, with a stifled scream, she had called out that Madame Sin was dead; then she had pronounced it sleep. . . .

Keane went at once to the central figure of the living-room: the body of Madame Sin, on a chaise-longue near the window. The woman was in blue negligee, with her shapely legs bare and her arms and throat pale ivory against the blue silk. Her eyes were not quite closed. Her breast rose and fell, very slowly, almost like the breathing of a chloroformed person.

Keane touched her bare shoulder. She did not stir. There was no alteration of the deep, slow breathing. He lifted one of her eyelids. The eye beneath stared blindly at him, the lid went nearly closed again at the cessation of his touch.

"Trance," Keane said. "And the most profound one I have ever seen. It's about what I had expected."

"I've seen her somewhere before," said Beatrice suddenly.

Keane nodded. "You have. She is a movie extra, working now and then for the Long Island Picture Company. But I'm not much interested in this beautiful shell. For that's all she is at the moment—a shell, now emptied and unhuman. We'll look around. You give me your impressions as they come to you, and we'll see if they match mine."

They went to the bedroom of the apartment. Bedroom was like living-room in that it was impersonal, a standard chamber in a large hotel. But this seemed almost incredibly impersonal! There was not one picture, not one feminine touch. In the bath there were scarcely any toilet articles; and in the closet there was only an overnight bag and a suitcase by way of luggage, with neither of them entirely emptied of their contents.

"One impression I get is that these rooms have not been lived in even for twenty-four hours!" said Beatrice.

Keane nodded. "If Madame Sin retreated here only to fall into that deep trance, and did not wake again till it was time for her to venture out, the rooms would have just this look. And I think that is exactly what she has done!"

Beatrice looked deftly through Madame Sin's meager wardrobe. Keane searched dresser and table and bureau drawers. He wasn't looking for anything definite, just something that might prove the final straw to point him definitely toward the incredible goal he was more and more convinced was near.

He found it in the top of the woman's suitcase.

His fingers were tense as he unfolded a

business letterhead. It was a carbon copy, filled with figures. And a glance told him what it was.

It was a duplicate of the financial statement of the Blue Bay Development Company—that statement which was held highly confidential, and which no one was supposed to have seen save the three Blue Bay officials, and a bank officer or two.

Keane strode to Madame Sin's phone, and got Gest on the wire.

"Gest, can you tell me if Kroner and Chichester are still out of the hotel?"

Gest's voice came back promptly. "Kroner is here with me now. I guess Chichester is still at his home on Ocean Boulevard; at any rate he isn't in the hotel——"

"Ascott!" Beatrice said tensely.

Keane hung up and turned to her.

"The woman—Madame Sin!" Beatrice said, pointing toward the still, lovely form on the chaise-longue. "I thought I saw her eyes open a little—thought I saw her look at you!"

Keane's own eyes went down a bit to veil the sudden glitter in them from Beatrice.

"Probably you were mistaken," he said easily. "Probably you only thought you saw her eyelids move. . . . I'm going to wind this up now, I think. You go back to your suite, and watch the time. If I'm not back here in two hours, go with the police to the home of Chichester, the treasurer of this unlucky resort development. And go fast," he added, in a tone that slowly drained the blood from Beatrice's anxious face.

5. *Death's Lovely Mask*

CHICHESTER's home sat on a square of lawn between the new boulevard and the bay shore like a white jewel in the sun. It looked prosperous, prosaic, serene. But to Keane's eyes, at least, it seemed covered with the psychic pall that had come to be associated in his mind with the dreaded Doctor Satan. He walked toward the blandly peaceful-looking new home with the feeling of one who walks toward a tomb.

"A feeling that might be well founded," he shrugged grimly, as he reached the porch.

He could feel the short hair at the base of his skull stir a little as he reached the door of this place he believed to be the latest lair of the man who was amused to call himself Doctor Satan. And it stirred still more as he tried the knob.

The door was unlocked.

He looked at it for several minutes. A lock wouldn't have mattered to Keane, and Satan knew that as well as Keane himself. Nevertheless, to leave the door invitingly open like this was almost too obliging!

He opened the door and stepped in, bracing himself for instant attack. But no attack of any kind was forthcoming. The front hall in which he found himself was deserted. Indeed, the whole house had that curiously breathless feeling encountered in homes for the moment untenanted.

Down the hall was an open double doorway. Keane stared that way. He himself could not have told how he knew, but know he did, that beyond that doorway lay what he had come to find. He walked toward it.

Behind him, the street door opened again, very slowly and cautiously. An eye was put close to the resultant crack. The eye was dark, exotically lovely. It fastened on Keane's back.

Keane stared in through the doorway. He was gazing into a library, dimmed by drawn shades. He entered it, with every nerve-end in his body silently shrieking of danger.

The street door softly closed after admitting a figure that moved on soundless feet. A woman, with a face like a pale flower on an exquisite throat. Madame Sin.

Her face was as serenely lovely as ever. Not by a line had it changed. And yet, subtly, it had become a mask of beautiful death. Her eyes were death's dark fires as she moved without a sound down the hall toward the library. In her tapering hands was the gold-link bag.

IN THE library, Keane stood with beating heart over two stark, still bodies that lay on the thick carpet near a flat-topped desk. One was wizened, lank, a little undersized, with dry-looking skin. It was the body of Chichester. At first it seemed a corpse, but then Keane saw the chest move with slow, deep breaths, as the breast of the woman back at the hotel had moved.

But it was not this figure that made Keane's heart thud and his hands clench. It was the other.

This was a taller figure, lying on its back with hands folded. The hands were red-gloved. The face was concealed by a red mask. The body was draped by a red cloak. From the head sprang two little knobs, or projections, like Lucifer's horns. Doctor Satan himself!

"It's my chance," whispered Keane. "Satan—sending his soul and mind and spirit from his own shell—into that of others—Madame Sin—Chichester. Now his body lies here empty! If I killed that——"

Exotically beautiful dark eyes—with death in their loveliness—watched him from the library doorway as he bent over the red-robed figure. Sardonic death in lovely eyes!

"No wonder Gest thought that Wilson was killed in the conference room, just before he could tell of the roulette wheel, as if Doctor Satan had been there himself! Satan *was* there! And he was on the roof garden earlier, and in the roulette room! A trance for the woman, the crowding of Satan's black spirit into her body—and she becomes Madame Sin, with Satan peering from her eyes and moving in her mantle of flesh! A trance for the unfortunate Chichester — and Satan talks with Gest and Kroner as the Blue Bay treasurer, and can strike down Wilson when he comes to report! Chichester and Madame Sin—both Doctor Satan — becoming lifeless, trance-held shells when Satan's soul has left them!"

But here was Satan's physical shell, lying in a coma at his feet, to be killed at a stroke! His deadly enemy, the enemy of all mankind, delivered helpless to him!

"But if I do kill the body," Keane whispered, "will I kill the spirit too, or banish it from the material world so that humanity won't again be troubled? Satan's spirit, the essential man, is abroad in another body. If I kill this red-robed body, will it draw the spirit out of mortal affairs with it? Or would it simply deprive it of its original housing so that I'd have to seek Satan's soul in body after body, as I have till now sought him in the flesh in lair after lair? That would be —horrible!"

He drove away the grim thought. It was probable that with the death of his body, Doctor Satan in entirety would die, or at least pass out of mortal knowledge through the gateway called death. And the mechanics of forcing him through that gateway was to kill the body.

Behind him, Madame Sin crept closer and closer on soundless feet. Her red lips were set in a still smile. The gold-link purse was extended a little toward Keane. Her forefinger searched for the movable bar that changed angles of the queer, metal cage within.

Keane's hand raised to strike. His

eyes burned down at the red-clad figure of the man at his feet, who was mankind's enemy. Behind him, Madame Sin's finger found the little bar. . . .

It was not till then that Keane felt the psychic difference caused by the entrance of another into a room that had been deserted save for himself. Another person would not have felt that difference at all, but Keane had developed his psychic perceptions as ordinary men exercise and develop their biceps.

With an inarticulate cry he whirled, and leaped far to the side.

The wall behind the spot where he had been disappeared as the gold-link bag continued to point that way. The woman, snarling like a tigress, swung her bag toward Keane in his new position. But Keane was not waiting. He sprang for her. His hand got her wrist and wrenched to get the gold-link purse away from her. It turned toward her, back again toward him, with the little bar moving as her hand was constricted over the thing in the purse.

It was a woman's body he struggled with. But there was strength in the fragile flesh beyond the strength of any woman! It took all his steely power to tear from her grasp the gold-link purse with its enclosed device. As he got it, he heard the woman's shrill cry of pain and terror, felt her sag in his arms. And then he heard many voices and stared around like a sleepwalker who has waked in a spot different from that in which he had begun his sleep—a comparison so exact that for one wild moment he thought it must be true!

He was in a familiar room. . . . Yes, Doctor Grays' room at the Blue Bay Hotel.

The people around him were familiar. . . . There was Gest. There were Kroner and Doctor Grays, and—Beatrice. There were the Blue Bay chief of police, and two men.

But the limp feminine form he held in his arms was Madame Sin, the fury he had been fighting in Chichester's library! And in his hand was still the gold link bag he had wrenched from her!

The woman in his arms stirred. She looked blankly up at him, stared around. A cry came from her lips.

"Where—am I? Who are you all? What are you doing in my room? But this isn't my room!"

Her face was different, younger-looking, less exotic. She wasn't Madame Sin; she was a frightened, puzzled girl.

Keane's brain had slipped back into gear, and into comprehension of what had happened.

"Where do you think you are?" he said gently. "And what is your name?"

"I'm Sylvia Crane," she said. "And I'm in a New York hotel room. At least I was the last I knew, when I opened the door and the man in the red mask came in. . . ."

She buried her face in her hands. "After that—I don't know what happened——"

"Nor do any of us," quavered Gest. "For God's sake, Keane, give us some idea of what has happened here, if you can!"

It was over an hour later when Beatrice and Keane entered the door of his suite. It had taken that long to explain to the people in Doctor Grays' rooms. Even then the explanation had been but partial, and most of it had been frenziedly and stubbornly disbelieved even though proof was there.

Keane's shoulders were bowed a little and his face wore a bitter look. He had thwarted Doctor Satan in his attempt to extort a fortune from the resort. But

once more his deadly enemy had got away from him. He had failed.

Beatrice shook her head.

"Don't look like that. The fact that you're here alive is a miracle that makes up for his escape. If you could have seen yourself, and that girl, when the police brought you back from Chichester's house! As soon as they set you down in the doctor's rooms, you and the girl came together. You fought again for her purse, as you say you started to do in Chichester's house ten hours ago. But you moved with such horrible slowness! It was like watching a slow-motion picture. It took you hours to raise your arm, hours to take the purse from her hand. And your expression changed with equal slowness. . . . I can't tell you how dreadful it was!"

"All due, as I said, to this," Keane sighed.

He stared at the little metal cage he had taken from the purse.

"The latest product of Doctor Satan's warped genius. A time-diverter, I suppose you might call it."

"I didn't understand your explanation in Grays' rooms, after you'd brought those people out of their dreadful coma," said Beatrice.

"I'll try again."

Keane held up the geometric figure.

"Time has been likened to a river. We don't know precisely what it is, but it seems that the river simile must be apt. Very well, we and all around us float on this river at the same speed. If there were different currents in the same river, we might have the spectacle of seeing those nearby move with lightning rapidity or with snail-like slowness as their time-environment differed from ours. Normally there is no such difference, but with this fantastic thing Doctor Satan has succeeded in producing them artificially.

"He has succeeded in working out several sets of angles which, when opposed against each other as this geometric figure opposes them, can either speed up or slow down the time-stream of whatever it is pointed at. The final angle is formed by this movable bar in its relation to the whole. By its manipulation, time can be indefinitely retarded or hastened. He utilized the bizarre creation in this way:

"In New York he contacted a quite innocent party by the name of Sylvia Crane. He hypnotized her, and forced his spirit into her body while hers was held in abeyance. Then 'Madame Sin' registered here. She made acquaintance with Weems. On the roof garden, she pointed the infernal figure at him, with the little bar turned to retard time. The result was that Weems suddenly lived and moved at immensely retarded speed. It took about twenty-four hours for his arm to raise the champagne glass to his lips, though he thought it took a second. Our actions were so swift by comparison that they didn't register on his consciousness at all. He confessed after I'd brought him out of his odd time-state with the device, that he seemed to raise his glass while in the roof garden, and start to lower it when he found himself abruptly in Doctor Grays' bedroom. He didn't know how he got there or anything else. It was the same with the nine in the roulette room. They came back to normal speed only a second or two after being retarded in the roulette room. But it was hours to us, and meanwhile they seemed absolutely motionless."

"How on earth did you ever get a hint of such a thing as this?" said Beatrice.

"Weems' watch gave a pointer. It was all right, the jeweler said, but it wouldn't run. Well, it did run—but at a speed so slow that it could not be recorded. The roulette wheel was another. The ivory

ball did not roll down the side of the wheel because the wheel was rotating—with infinite slowness after being retarded by the same thing that made the people look like frozen statues. Satan, as Madame Sin, couldn't do anything about the wheel. But he—or 'she'—could and did take the watches from all concerned, to guard against discovery that way. However, there was no chance to get Weems' watch; there were always people around."

"You said Doctor Satan moved in the body of Chichester as he did in the girl's body."

"Yes. I got a hint of that when I observed that Chichester and Madame Sin never seemed to be in evidence at the same time. Also because the exact sum of Blue Bay's cash reserve was so readily learned. Again when Wilson was killed in a room where only the three officials sat. He was killed by Chichester, who was at the moment animated by Satan's soul. He was killed, by the way, by a *speeding-up* of time. The rest were retarded and suffered nothing but nerve shock. Wilson was killed when the speed of his time-stream was multiplied by a million: you can stop a heart without injuring it, but you can't suddenly accelerate a heart, or any other machine, a million times, without bursting it. That's why his heart looked as though it had blown up in his chest."

Keane stopped. The bitter look grew in his eyes.

"This failure was wholly my own fault," he said in a low tone. "I knew when I found the duplicate financial statement in Madame Sin's rooms that it was a trap to draw me to Chichester's home. Doctor Satan would never have been so careless as to leave a thing like that behind inadvertently. Knowing it was a trap, I entered it, and found Satan's soulless body. If I'd destroyed it immediately. . . . But I didn't dream that Madame Sin would follow me so quickly."

BEATRICE's hand touched Keane's fleetingly. He was looking at the geometric figure and did not see the look in her eyes.

"The world can thank heaven you're alive," she said softly. "With you dead, Doctor Satan could rule the earth——"

There was a knock at the door. Gest was in the hall.

"Keane," he said. "I suppose this will sound like a small thing after all you've done. You've saved us from bankruptcy and saved Lord knows how many people from a living death from that time-business you tried to explain to us. Now there's one more thing. Workmen in Chichester's home tell us that they can't build up one of the walls of the library, which is non-existent for some reason. There the room is, with one wall out, and it can't be blocked up! Do you suppose you——"

Keane nodded, with a little of his bitterness relieved by a smile.

"I remember. The time-diverter was pointed at that wall for an instant as the girl and I struggled. Evidently it was set for maximum acceleration, to burst my heart as it did Wilson's. It got the library wall, which is gone because in the point of the future which it almost instantly reached, there is no library or home or anything else on that spot. I'll bring it back to the present, and to existence again, so you won't have a physical impossibility to try to explain to nervous guests of Blue Bay Resort."

"And after that," he added to himself, "I'll destroy this invention of Hell. And I wish its destruction would annihilate its inventor along with it—before he contrives some new and even more terrible toy!"

"Within this ring the Arab stood upright. His voice boomed out like a great metal gong."

Werewolf of the Sahara

By G. G. PENDARVES

A tremendous tale, depicted against the background of the great desert, about the evil Arab sheykh El Shabur, and dreadful occult forces that were unleashed in a desperate struggle for the soul of a beautiful girl

THE three of them were unusually silent that night over their after-dinner coffee. They were camping outside the little town of Sollum on the Libyan coast of North Africa. For three weeks they had been delayed here *en route* for the Siwa oasis. Two men and a girl.

"So we really start tomorrow." Merle Anthony blew a cloud of smoke toward the glittering night sky. "I'm almost sorry. Sollum's been fun. And I've done two of the best pictures I ever made here."

"Was that why you burned them up yesterday?" her cousin, Dale Fleming, inquired in his comfortable pleasant voice.

The girl's clear pallor slowly crimsoned. "Dale! What a——"

"It's all right, Merle," Gunnar Sven interrupted her. "Dale's quite right. Why pretend this delay has done you any good? And it's altogether my fault. I found that out today in the market. Overheard some Arabs discussing our expedition to Siwa."

"Your fault!" Merle's beautiful face, and eyes gray as a gull's wing, turned to him. "Why, you've simply slaved to get the caravan ready."

Gunnar got to his feet and walked out to the verge of the headland on which they were camped. Tall, straight as a pine he stood.

The cousins watched him; the girl with trouble and perplexity, the man more searchingly. His eyes, under straight upper lids, flatly contradicted the rest of his appearance. He was very fat, with fair hair and smooth unlined face despite his forty years. A sort of Pickwickian good humor radiated from him. Dale Fleming's really great intellectual power showed only in those three-cornered heavily-lidded eyes of his.

"Why did you give me away?" Merle demanded.

His round moon face beamed on her. "Why bluff?" he responded.

"Snooping about as usual. Why don't you go and be a real detective?" she retorted crossly.

He gave a comfortable chuckle, but his eyes were sad. It was devilishly hard to watch her falling for this Icelander. Ever since his parents had adopted her—an orphan of six—she had come first in Dale's affections. His love was far from Platonic. Gunnar Sven was a fine creature, but there was something wrong. Some mystery shadowed his life. What it was, Dale was determined to discover.

"Truth will out, my child! The natives are in terror of him. You know it as well as I do! They're all against helping you and me because he's our friend."

"Stop being an idiot. No one could be afraid of Gunnar. And he's particularly good with natives."

"Yes. He handles them well. I've never seen a young 'un do it better."

"Well, then?"

"There's something queer about him. These Arabs know it. We know it. It's about two months now since he joined forces with us. Just after my mother decamped and left us in Cairo. The cable summoning her home to Aunt Sue's death-bed arrived Wednesday, May 3rd. She sailed May 5th. Gunnar Sven turned up May 6th."

"All right. I'm not contradicting you. It's never any use."

"You refused to wait for Mother's return in Cairo, according to her schedule."

"Well! Cairo! Everyone paints Cairo and the Nile. I wanted subjects that every five-cent tourist hadn't raved over."

"You wanted Siwa Oasis. Of all God-forsaken dangerous filthy places! And in the summer——"

"You know you're dying to see the oasis too," she accused. "Just trying to save your face as my guardian and protector. Hypocrite!"

He roared with laughter. The Arab cook and several other servants stopped singing round their cooking-pots to grin at the infectious sound.

"*Touché!* I'd sacrifice my flowing raven locks to go to Siwa. But"—his face grew surprizingly stern—"about Gunnar. Why

does he take such enormous pains not to tell us the name of the man he's been working for?"

"I've never asked him."

"I haven't in so many words, of course. But I've led him up to the fence over and over again. He's steadily refused it. With good reason."

"Well?"

"He works for an Arab. A sheykh. A man notorious from Morocco to Cairo. His nickname's Sheykh El Afrit. The Magician! His real name is Sheykh Zura El Shabur."

"And what's so earth-shaking about that?" asked Merle, patting a dark curl into place behind her ear.

"He's a very—bad—hat! Black Magic's no joke in this country. This Sheykh El Shabur's gone far. Too far."

"I'm going to talk to Gunnar. He'll tell me. It's fantastic. Gunnar and Black Magic indeed!"

Dale watched her, amused and touched. How she loathed subtleties and mysteries and tangled situations!

"She'd waltz up to a lion and pull its whiskers if anyone told her they were false. As good at concealment as a searchlight."

GUNNAR turned from the sea as Merle walked purposefully in his direction. He stood beside her—mountain pine overshadowing a little silver birch.

"H-m-m!" Dale threw away a freshly lighted cigarette and took another. "Merle and I wouldn't suggest that. More like Friar Tuck and Maid Marian."

He was startled to see Gunnar suddenly leap and turn. The man looked as if he'd had a tremendous shock. He stood peering across the wastelands stretching eastward, frozen into an attitude of utmost horror.

Dale ran across to Merle. She broke from his detaining hand and rushed to Gunnar's side.

"What is it? What do you see? Gunnar! Answer me, Gunnar!"

His tense muscles relaxed. He sighed, and brushed a hand across his eyes and wet forehead.

"He's found me. He's coming. I had hoped never——"

"Who? What are you talking about?"

She shook his arm in terror at his wild look and words.

"He said I was free! Free! I wouldn't have come near you if I'd known he lied. Now I've brought him into *your* life. Merle! Forgive me!"

He took her hands, kissed them frantically, then turned to Dale with burning haste and fairly pushed him away.

"Go! Go! Go! Now—before he comes. Leave everything! Ride for your lives. He'll force me to . . . go! Go!"

"*Ma yarudd!* What means this, Gunnar—my servant?"

The deep guttural voice seemed to come up from the bowels of the earth. The three turned as if a bomb had exploded. A figure loomed up not ten feet away. Merle stared with wide startled eyes. A minute ago the level wasteland had shown bare, deserted. How had this tall Arab approached unseen?

Gunnar seemed to shrink and wither. His face was tragic. The newcomer fixed him for a long moment in silence, staring him down.

"What means this, Gunnar, my servant?" Once more the words vibrated through the still night.

The Icelander made a broken ineffectual movement of his hands, and began to speak. His voice died away into low, vague murmurings.

"For this you shall account to me later," promised the tall Arab.

He strode forward. His black burnoose rippled and swayed about him. Its

peaked hood was drawn close. A long face with pointed black beard, proud curving nose, and eyes dark and secret as forest pools gleamed beneath the hood.

Merle shrank back. Her fingers clutched Gunnar's. They were cold and limp in her grasp.

Dale leaned forward, peering into the Arab's face as a connoisseur examines an etching of rare interest.

"You speak very good English, my friend. Or is it enemy?"

The whole demeanor of the Arab changed. His white teeth flashed. He held out welcoming hands, clasped Dale's in his own, and bowed low to the girl. He turned last to the Icelander.

"Present me!" he ordered.

GUNNAR performed the small ceremony with white lips. His voice sounded as if he'd been running hard.

"Zura El Shabur. Zura of the Mist," translated the sheykh. "I am your friend. I have many friends of your Western world. The language! All languages are one to me!"

Dale beamed. "Ah! Good linguist and all that! Jolly good name yours, what! Gave us quite a scare, popping up out of the atmosphere like Aladdin's *djinnee!*"

El Shabur's thin lips again showed his teeth.

"Those that dwell in the desert's solitude and silence learn to reflect its qualities."

"Quite! Quite!" Dale gurgled happy agreement. "Neat little accomplishment. Very convenient—for you!"

"Convenient on this occasion for you also, since my coming prevented the inhospitality of my servant from driving you away."

"No! You're wrong there. Gunnar's been our guardian angel for weeks past. Given us a wonderful time."

"Nevertheless, I heard that he urged you to go—to go quickly from Sollum."

Dale burst into laughter; long, low gurgles that relieved tension all around. "I'm one of those fools that'd rather lose a pot of gold than alter my plans. One of the camel-drivers has made off with a few bits of loot. You heard the thrifty Gunnar imploring me to follow him."

Merle backed up the tale with quick wit. "Nothing of vast importance. My silver toilet things, a leather bag, and a camera. Annoying, but hardly worth wasting hours to retrieve."

She came forward, all anxiety to give Gunnar time to pull himself together.

El Shabur made her a second low obeisance and stared down into her upturned vivid face. "Such youth and beauty must be served. Shall I send Gunnar after the thief?"

The idea of separation gave her a shock. Intuition warned her to keep the Icelander at her side for his sake, and for her own. Together there seemed less danger.

Danger! From what? Why did the word drum through her brain like an S.O.S. signal? She glanced at Gunnar. His face was downbent.

"No." She met the Arab's eyes with effort and gave a valiant little smile. "No. Indeed not. We can't spare him. He's promised to come with us, to be our guide to the Siwa Oasis."

"Hope this won't clash with your plans for him. We've got so dependent on his help now." Dale's cherubic face registered anxiety.

"So." The Arab put a hand on Gunnar's shoulder. "It is good. You have done well."

The young man shivered. His eyes met Merle's in warning.

El Shabur turned to reassure her and Dale.

"Now all goes well. I, too, will join

your caravan. It is necessary for my—my work—that I should visit Siwa very soon. I go also."

Dale took the outstretched hand. "Fine! Fine! We'll make a record trip now."

In his tent, Dale slept after many hours of hard, concentrated thought and intellectual work — very pink, very tired, younger-looking than ever in his profound repose.

In her tent, Merle lay quiet too.

Native servants snored, shapeless cocoons in their blankets. Even the camels had stopped moaning and complaining, and couched peacefully, barracked in a semicircle. Great mounds of baggage within its wide curve lay ready for loading.

Moonlight silvered long miles of grass and rushes. Leagues of shining water swung in almost tideless rhythm half a mile from camp.

Gunnar looked out on the scene from his tent. What had roused him from sleep? Why was his heart thumping, and the blood drumming in his ears? He peered out into the hushed world.

Tents, men, camels and baggage showed still as things on a painted canvas. He left his tent, made a noiseless detour about the sleeping camp, then frowned and stared about in all directions.

A bird, rising on startled wing, made him look sharply at an old Turkish fort. It stood, grim and battered sentinel, on a near-by promontory of Sollum Bay. Through its gaping ruined walls he caught a glint of fire — green, livid, wicked flames that stained the night most evilly.

"El Shabur! Already! The Pentacle of Fire!"

His whisper was harsh as the faint drag of pebbles on the shore. For several minutes he stood as if chained. Fear and anger warred with dawning resolution and a wild anxiety. Then he stumbled over to Merle's tent and tore open its flap. Flashlight in hand, he went in and stared down at the sleeping girl. She lay white and rigid as if in a trance. Gunnar touched her forehead, took up a limp hand in his own. She gave no sign of life.

He stood looking down at the still, waxen features. The rather square, resolute little face was uniformly white, even to the curved, just-parted lips. The hair seemed wrought in metal, so black and heavy and lifeless did it wave above the broad, intelligent brow. Gunnar looked in awe. The girl's animated, sparkling face was changed to something remote and strange and exquisite. Half child, half priestess.

"And in a few short weeks or months," he muttered, "El Shabur will initiate her. This is the first step. She will rot—perish—as I am doing!"

He bent, in passionate horror, over the still face.

"No! No! Not for you! Dear lovely child!"

He clenched his hands. "But if I disturb him now!"

For minutes he stood irresolute. Fear took him by the throat. He could not—he *could* not interfere! At last his will steadied. He mastered the sick terror that made him tremble and shiver like a beaten dog. As he left the tent, he glanced back once more.

"Good-bye! I'll do all I can," he promised softly. "I'd give my soul to save you—if I still had one."

He ran to the headland where the old fort stood. If El Shabur's occupation was what he feared, he would neither hear nor see. Intensely concentrating on his rites, nothing in the visible world would reach him.

Gunnar's calculations were justified.

He went boldly in through the arched entrance to an inner court where green fires burned in a great ring, five points of two interlacing triangles which showed black upon the gray dust of the floor. In the center of this cabalistic symbol stood El Shabur, clothed in black. The rod he held was of black ebony.

Gunnar drew breath. He listened to the toneless continuous muttering of the sheykh. What point had El Shabur reached in his conjurations? How long since he had drawn Merle's soul from the lovely quiet body lying in her tent? It was of vital importance to know. If the devilish business was only begun, he might free her. If El Shabur had reached the last stage, closed the door behind the soul he was luring from its habitation, then it was fatally late.

He listened, head thrust forward, trying to distinguish the rapidly muttered words.

"Shekinah! Aralim! Ophanim! Assist me in the name of Melek Taos, Ruler of wind and stars and sea, who commands the four elements in the might of Adonai and the Ancient Ones!"

"A-h-h-h!" Gunnar gave a deep gasping sigh of relief. He was not too late. Sheykh El Shabur called on his allies. Merle's spirit was not yet cut off from its home. Her will resisted the Arab's compulsion.

He leaped forward, oversetting all five braziers. Their fire spilled and died out instantly. In the cold clear moonlight, El Shabur loomed tall, menacing. He stood glaring across the courtyard at the intruder. His black-clad figure overshadowed the Icelander's by many inches, like a cloud, like a bird of prey. Malignant, implacable he towered.

Gunnar's golden head sank. His strong, straight body seemed to shrink and crumple. Inch by inch he retreated, until he reached the wall. He tried to meet the Arab's unblinking stare and failed. Again his bright head sank. His eyes sought the dusty earth. But his whole frame trembled with a wild, fanatical excitement. He had succeeded so far—had brought El Shabur back from that void where Merle's spirit had so perilously wandered. She was free. Free to go back to that still white body lying in her tent.

"So! You love this girl. You would save her from me. You—who cannot save yourself!"

"You're right." The young man's voice shook. "Right as far as I'm concerned. But Miss Anthony's on a different plane. You're not going to play your filthy tricks on her."

"So! It would seem that, in spite of my teaching, you are not yet well disciplined. Have you forgotten your vow? Have you forgotten that a cabalist may *never* retreat one inch of the road he treads? Have you forgotten the punishment that overtakes the renegade?"

"I would die to save her from you."

The other showed white teeth in a mirthless sardonic grin.

"Die!" echoed his deep, mocking voice. "Death is not for us. Are you not initiated and under protection? What can bring death to such as you?"

"There must be a way of escape for me—and for her. I will defeat you yet, El Shabur!"

The Icelander's voice rose. His eyes were blazing. He stepped forward. Moonlight touched his shining hair, his passion-contorted features, his angry, bloodshot eyes. Control slipped from him. He strove in vain to recapture it, to use his reason. He knew that anger was delivering him bound and helpless into his enemy's hands. It had been so from their first encounter. Emotion *versus* reason. He knew his fatal weakness, and strove against it now—in vain. Long

habit ruled. Anger made his will a thing of straw.

"You would defy me—the Power I serve—the Power that serves me?"

Gunnar felt the blood rushing to his head. His ears sang. Red mist obscured his sight.

"You are a devil! And you serve devils!" he shouted. "But you won't always win the game! Curse you, El Shabur! Curse you! Curse you!"

The Arab looked long into his angry eyes, and came closer. With an incredibly swift movement he clasped the shaking, furious figure.

Gunnar felt dry lips touch his ears and mouth and brow, heard a low quick mutter. Then El Shabur released him suddenly, and stood back.

"Ignorant and beast-like! *Be* what you are—slave to your own passion! You, yourself, create the devil that haunts you. Therefore are you mine—for all devils are subject to me. *Be* what you are! Out, beast! Howl and snarl with your own kind until the dawn."

For a moment something dark scuffled in the dust at El Shabur's feet. The courtyard rang with a long, desolate howl. A shadow, lean and swift, fled from the camp, far, far out across the empty wasteland.

AT SUNSET, the next day, Dale Fleming and his caravan reached Bir Augerin, the first well on their march. They had delayed their start some hours. Merle had insisted in waiting for Gunnar, but he had not turned up.

"He will join us *en route*," the sheykh had assured her. "He is well used to desert travel, *Mademoiselle!*"

"But his camel?"

"We will take it. He can easily hire another."

"Have you no idea why he went off and left us without warning? It's so unlike him."

El Shabur gave his dark unmirthful smile.

"He is young. Young and careless and —undisciplined. He has—friends. Oh, he is popular! That golden hair of his—it has a fascination. . . ."

Merle's face crimsoned and grew pale. Dale's round face concealed his thoughts. He glanced at the Arab's lean hands that twisted a stiff length of wire rope with such slow and vicious strength. He had learned how betraying hands may be.

Merle made no more objections, and at 3:30 p. m. the caravan set out. The natives were superstitious about a journey's start. Mondays, Thursdays and Saturdays were fortunate; and Saturday the luckiest of the week.

At Bir Augerin, camp was quickly made. The servants drew up water from the large rectangular tank in leather buckets. Merle sat disconsolate to watch, and smoke, and think of Gunnar. Dale joined her, leaving the sheykh to direct the men.

"I don't believe it!" Merle burst out.

"About our absent friend?"

"Gunnar's not that sort. I think they've had a quarrel. Dale!" She put a beseeching hand on his arm. "You don't think—he wouldn't kill Gunnar!"

"My prophetic bones tell me not." He patted the hand in brisk, business-like fashion. "He'll turn up and explain himself. Don't worry. This Sheykh of the Mist's a queer old josser. About as trustworthy as a black panther, but the boy's too useful to be killed off in a hurry. All the same—look here, Merle: keep this handy at night."

He put a small snub-nosed automatic in her hand.

"It's loaded. And I've taught you to use it. Listen! There are wolves on this trail. Heard 'em last night about the camp."

"Wolves? In the desert? Jackals, you mean."

"Don't speak out of turn. Wolves. You know—things that go off like this."

He threw back his head and gave a blood-curdling howl that electrified the camp. El Shabur spun on his heel, long knife drawn. The servants groveled, then ran to pluck brands from the fire.

Dale gave a rich, infectious gurgle. "Splendid! Must have done that jolly well. Now perhaps you'll recognize a wolf when you hear it. If you do—shoot!"

SOON after four a. m. the caravan set out again in the chill clear moonlight. In spite of grilling days, the nights remained cool and made travel easy. They reached their next halt, Bir Hamed, about eight o'clock. This cistern was the last before real desert began. They decided to give the camels a good day's grazing and watering and push off again in the small hours before dawn.

Cooking-pots were slung over crackling fires. Fragrance of wood smoke mingled with odor of frying sausages and onions. Dale went over and implored the cook to refrain from using last night's dish-water to brew coffee. El Shabur approached Merle and pointed to the east.

"He comes."

She dropped a camera and roll of films and jumped to her feet.

"Who? Gunnar? I see no one."

"He comes riding from over there."

Low rolling dunes to the east showed bare and smooth and empty of life. She stared, and frowned at the speaker. "I see nothing. Dale!" she called out. "The sheykh says Gunnar's coming from over there. Can you see him?"

Dale scrutinized the empty eastern horizon, then turned to El Shabur with a bland wide smile. "Ah, you wonderful Arabs! Putting one over on us, aren't you? You people have extra valve sets. Pick up things from the ether. It's enough to give me an inferiority complex."

He thrust an arm through Merle's. "If he says so, it is so! I'll tell cook to fry a few more sausages.

"Servants are all in a state of jim-jams this morning," he said as he returned from his hospitable errand. "Ilbrahaim's been handing out samples from the *Thousand and One Nights' Entertainments.* What d'you suppose he's started now?"

"They talk much," the sheykh's deep scornful voice replied. "And they say nothing."

"Ilbrahaim is a chatty little fellow. Be invaluable at a funeral, wouldn't he? Distract the mourners and all that! Unless he got on to vampires and ghouls. He's keen on cabalistic beliefs."

"Such things are childish; they have no interest for a cabalist."

"No — really! Well, you probably know. Is there a place called *Bilad El Kelab?*"

El Shabur's eyes glinted. His chin went up in a gesture of assent.

"There is? Ah, then Ilbrahaim tells the truth now and then. His brother went to this place. *Country of the Dogs*—suggestive name! The yarn is that all the men there turn to dogs at sunset. Like werewolves, you know."

"*Bilad El Kelab* is far away. South—far south in the Sudan. Ilbrahaim has no brother, moreover."

"No?"

"No. There are many foolish legends from the Sudan."

"Not so foolish. I'm interested in folklore and legend and primitive beliefs. That's why I'm going to Siwa, apart from looking after my little cousin here."

El Shabur's eyes smoldered. "It is unwise to be too curious about such things.

That which feeds an eagle is no meat for a fish."

"Quite! Quite! Good that, isn't it, Merle? Meaning we Westerners are fish! Oh, definitely good! This Ilbrahaim, though—he swears our camp's being haunted. He thinks a weredog, or werewolf, has attached itself to us. Says he woke and saw it prowling about last night."

"A long trail from the *Bilad El Kelab!*"

"You're right, El Shabur. Still, what's a few hundred miles to a werewolf? And I suppose it travels on camel-back by day, if it's got its man's body in good repair. Have to be a new camel each morning—eh? Not likely a self-respecting *mehari* would trot hoof in paw with a wolf each night."

"Dale! Is it the same wolf you said was——"

A cousinly kick on the ankle, as Dale moved to replace a blazing branch on the fire, warned her.

"Is it the wolf-tale they talked about in Alexandria?" she switched off quickly.

"Dear child!" Dale beamed approval. "How your little wits *do* work! No! That wolf was a jackal that haunted the Valley of the Kings in Egypt."

El Shabur turned his head sharply. "The lost one arrives," he remarked.

In the distance, magnified and distorted by the hot desert air, a vast camel and rider loomed. Merle lighted a cigarette with slow, unsteady hands.

"It may be anyone. Impossible to tell yet."

The sheykh spread his hands. "*Mademoiselle* will soon discover."

In half an hour, Gunnar rode into camp. A sorry figure, disheveled, unshaven, he looked as if he'd been across Africa with a minimum of food and sleep. Merle had meant to be unrelenting at first, to await explanation, but her heart betrayed her at sight of this desperately weary man. She ran to meet him as he dismounted, and tried to lead him over to where Dale and the Arab sat smoking.

He stood swaying on his feet. "No. Not now." His cracked, parched lips could scarcely frame the words. "I must sleep. I—I could not help it. I was prevented—I was prevented," he croaked.

"Gunnar—of course!" She beckoned to a servant. "Take care of him. I'll send Dale *effendi* to give him medicine. He is ill."

In the late afternoon the camp was in more or less of an uproar. The camels were driven in from pasturage to drink once again. They would have preferred to go on grazing, and, being camels, they expressed disapproval noisily, and gave much trouble to the cursing, sweating men.

Dale sauntered off from their vicinity. The sun was casting shadows that lengthened steadily. He stopped in the shadow of a huge boulder and stared thoughtfully out across the barren desert.

"Got his goat all right about that legend and the cabalists. Now, just why did that strike home? The pattern's there, but all in little moving bits. I can't get the confounded mosaic right. Cabalists! Werewolves! Gunnar and the Sheykh of the Mist! Haunted camp and all the rest of it! A very, very pretty little mix-up. I wonder now . . . I wonder. . . ."

His eyes, fixed in abstracted non-seeing gaze, suddenly became wary. His big body grew taut. Then, with the lightness of movement for which fat men are often remarkable, he vanished into a cleft of the great rock. His hearing was acute and voices carried far in the desert stillness.

". . . until we reach Siwa. From sunrise to sunset I will be with her." Gunnar's bitterness was apparent. "If you interfere I will tell her *what you are!*"

"In return I will explain *what you*

are — after sunset!" El Shabur's voice mocked. "Will the knowledge make her turn to you for protection?"

"You devil!"

"You fool! Do not meddle with power you cannot control. Until Siwa, then."

They passed out of earshot. Dale watched them return to camp.

"More bits of mosaic, nice lurid color, too. Looks as though Siwa's going to be even more promising than I imagined. Evil old city, enough to make one write another Book of Revelations?"

THE sun cast long shadows, stretching grotesquely over pink-stained leagues of sand. Dale was anxious to watch Gunnar when the sun actually did set; he felt that phrase of the young Icelander's had been significant: *From sunrise to sunset I will be with her.* Rather an odd poetic reference to time! Taken in conjunction with his unexplained disappearance last night, it was specially odd.

Dale ambled slowly in the direction of camp, empty pipe between his teeth. He had stayed a long hour. From his rocky crevice, he had watched Gunnar and the Arab return, seen Gunnar start off again with Merle into the desert. The two were returning now—dark against the reddening sky.

He was curious to see how the young man was going to behave; what explanation, if any, he had given to Merle. He was overwhelmingly anxious to discover just how far she returned the love that burned so stedfastly in Gunnar's eyes. If it was serious—really serious—with her, the whole queer dangerous situation was going to be deadly.

She would go her own way. If her heart was given, it was given, for good or evil. It seemed entirely evil, in his judgment, if she had decided to link her fate with this Icelander.

And El Shabur! How dangerous was this notorious Arab magician? Men of his practises fairly haunted desert cities and oases. Mostly they were harmless, sometimes genuinely gifted in the matter of prophecy. Rarely, they were men of inexplicable and very terrible power; who were dedicated, brain and body, to the cause of evil—evil quite beyond the comprehension of normal people.

Dale's eyes were cold and implacable as he recollected one or two such men he had known: his pleasant face looked unbelievably austere and grim.

One way or another, Merle stood in imminent and pressing danger; from Gunnar, no less than from El Shabur; from Gunnar, not because he was of himself evil, but because he was a channel through which the Arab could reach her. She was vulnerable in proportion to her love. There were infinite sources of danger ahead. El Shabur had a definite plan regarding her, something that would mature at Siwa. Three days remained to discover the nature of that plan.

Three days! Perhaps not even that. Gunnar's relations with the Arab seemed dangerously explosive; a crisis might work up at any moment. Merle would then be implicated, for she would defend Gunnar with blind partizanship. All the odds were on El Shabur. It was his country; he could queer the expedition easily without any supernatural agency. And, if he were the deadly poisonous creature Dale began to suspect, then the lonely desert made a superb background for murder . . . he called it murder to himself, unwilling to give a far more terrible name to what he suspected El Shabur might do.

The lovers, walking slowly, reluctantly back to camp, were completely absorbed in each other.

"If only I'd known you earlier!" The man's sunken eyes looked down on the

erect, slim, lovely girl beside him with immense regret.

"The only thing we can do about it is to make up for lost time, darling."

He stopped, faced her, took both firm, rather square hands in his own. "Merle, you're being a miracle. But it's impossible. I oughtn't to have told you how much I cared."

"Poor dear! You hadn't any choice, really. I did the leap year stunt before you could stop me; and, being a little gent, you simply had to say you loved me, too!"

She rattled away, hardly knowing what she said. "I've got to alter that look in his eyes," she told herself. "I thought it was because of me, conceited little beast that I am. But it isn't—it isn't!

"Gunnar," she tackled him with characteristic impetuosity. "Is your fear of El Shabur the biggest thing in your life? Is it bigger than—than your love for me?"

The grip of his hands tightened. His face bent to hers. His haunted red-rimmed eyes looked into her candid gray ones, that shone with love and kindness and a stedfast unwavering trust that made him want to kiss her dusty shoes. Instead, he dropped her hands, pulled his hat down over his face, walked on with quickened stride toward the distant encampment.

"It's no use . . . I can't go on with it. I'm in a tangle that no one on earth can straighten out. It's revolting to think of you being caught up in such a beastly mess. I went into this thing because I was a young inquisitive fool! I'd no idea what it involved, no idea at all that there was something behind it stronger . . . stronger than death! I was blind, I was credulous, I was utterly ignorant; I walked into El Shabur's trap—and the door shut behind me!"

"Gunnar, darling, *can't* you explain? People don't have to go on serving masters they hate unless—unless——"

"Exactly! Unless they're slaves. Well, I am his slave."

"I don't understand you."

"Thank heaven for it, and don't try! It's because you must never, *never* understand such things that I wanted you and Dale to go away that night at Sollum."

"If you owe the sheykh your time, can't you buy him off? Surely any contract can be broken."

"Not the one that binds me to him. Listen, Merle, my own! I can't—I daren't say more than this. Think of him as a poison—as something that blackens and burns like vitriol. Will you do what may seem a very childish thing, will you do it to please me?"

"What is it?"

"Tie this across the entrance of your sleeping-tent at night." He held out a little colored plait, four threads of green, white, red, and black, from which a seal depended. "Once more, I daren't explain, but use it. Promise me!"

TAKEN aback by his tone and manner, she promised. What, she thought, had a bit of colored string to do with all this mystery about him and the sheykh? A fleeting doubt as to his sanity came to her.

"No," he answered the look. "I was never more sane than now—when it's too late. Too late for myself, at least. You—nothing *shall* happen to you!"

"Won't you talk to Dale? He's such a queer wise old thing, I'm sure he could help if only you'd explain things to him."

"No. Not yet, at any rate. Not until we get to Siwa. I'll explain everything then. Silence is the price I've paid to be with you on this trip."

"But, really Dale is——"

"If you don't want him to die sudden-

ly, say nothing to him. Anyone that interferes with El Shabur gets rubbed out like this!"

Gunnar stamped a small pebble deep into the sand.

"All right," she promised with a shiver. That quick vicious little movement had given her a sudden horrid fear of the sheykh—more than all Gunnar's words. "I'll say nothing. But Dale is pretty hard to deceive. There never seems any need to tell him things; he just knows them. I expect he's burrowing away underground about El Shabur already, just like an old ferret! I happen to know he loathes him."

"Nobody'd think so to see them chin-wagging."

"He behaves like a garrulous moron when he's putting salt on anyone's tail, and I've seldom seen him wallowing quite so idiotically as now."

"Much more likely the sheykh's putting salt on *his* tail by pretending to believe Dale's a fool."

"You don't know Dale."

"You don't know El Shabur." Gunnar had the last word—it proved to be accurate.

They found the two in camp and deep in talk.

"Arguing about our pet werewolf." Dale was bland. "Will you sit up with me and try a pot shot at the beast, Gunnar?"

The tall Icelander stood in silence. His face was a gray mask, his sunken eyes stared hard and long into the other's blank smooth face. He turned to the sheykh at length.

"You suggested this?"

Merle shivered at his voice.

The Arab shrugged. "On the contrary. It would be wisdom to sleep before tomorrow's march. If the *effendi* desires to hunt it would be well to wait until we reach the hills of Siwa."

"Well," Dale seemed determined to prolong the discussion, "what do you vote for, old man? The werewolf tonight, or the Siwa hills later?"

"The hills—definitely, the hills," the young man's voice cracked on a laugh. "According to legend, you can't kill a werewolf. No use wasting our shots and a night's sleep too."

"Thwarted!" moaned Dale. "The hills of Siwa, then. You can promise good hunting there, Sheykh?"

"By my sacred *wasm*."

"*Wasm?*" Dale lighted a cigarette with casual air.

"My mark, my insignia, my tribal sign. It is like heraldry in your land."

"Heavens above! I must remember to call my little label a *wasm* in future. Intriguing word, that! And what is your mark?"

El Shabur leaned forward and traced it in the sand. Dale regarded it with a smile that masked deep uneasiness. He recognized the ghastly little sign; he was one of the very few who had the peculiar knowledge to do so. A smoke-screen from his eternal pipe shielded his face from the watchful Arab. Was El Shabur trying to trick him into exposing his very special and intimate knowledge of the occult; or did he make that deadly mark feeling sure that only an initiate would recognize it?

El Shabur was a Yezidee, a Satanist, and worshipped Melek Taos. The symbol was unmistakably the outspread tail of the Angel-Peacock. Dale recoiled inwardly at having his darkest fears confirmed; he knew of no tribe on earth more vicious and powerful than the Yezidees. Their name and their fame went back into mists of time. Seldom did one of them leave his hills and rock-dwelling up beyond Damascus. Once in a century or so, throughout the ages, a priest of the Yezidees would stalk the earth like a black

destroying god to acquaint himself with the world and its conditions. He would return to teach his tribe. So they remained, a nucleus of evil power that never seemed to die out.

"Nice little design; looks like half a ray-fish," he commented. Impossible to fathom what was going on behind the sheykh's carven, immobile features. "*Wasm* — did you say? Wait, I must write that down."

The whites of the Arab's eyes glinted as he glanced at Merle. "Are you like your cousin in this—do you also suffer from loss of memory?"

"I—we—what do you mean?"

"You have a saying in your Book of Wisdom, 'Thy much learning doth turn thee to madness.' The *effendi* is like to that man, Paul. For who, after years and years of study, could forget so simple a thing as a *wasm?*"

Dale didn't move a muscle. His bluff was called. All right! On with the next dance! Too late he realized why the Arab had started the absorbing *wasm* topic. It had been intended to shock and distract his own thoughts from Gunnar—to prevent his keeping an eye on him.

The Icelander had got up and gone over to his tent a minute ago with a murmur about tobacco. He had not returned. Dale was on his feet and peering into Gunnar's tent in a flash. No one there. He looked at the western horizon—the sun had dipped beyond it. He scanned the desert. It offered no shelter for Gunnar's six feet of height. He looked into every tent; saw that only the servants crouched before their fires, that only baggage lay heaped upon the ground.

Shadows were melting into dusk. But one long shadow seemed to move over there among the dunes not far away! Were his own dark thoughts inventing the thing that fled across the desert?

The darkest thought of all came as he went back to Merle and the silent watchful Arab. Was he a match for this man?

"You needn't worry about Gunnar. The Arab's at the back of these nightly disappearances, I'm quite certain, although the reasons he gave were of his own invention."

"Then you think he'll come back?" Merle looked tired and anxious in the light of her small lamp.

"He'll come back," asserted the man. "Good night, old lady. If you feel nervous or want anything, just give a yelp. I'll be awake—got to finish a bit of research work."

She caught a look that belied his cheerful voice. "Why d'you look round my tent like that? Is there any special danger —that wolf?"

"Well, I don't mind telling you there is a spot of danger. You're not the sort that goes off like a repeating-rifle at being warned. But—have you got your doodah handy?"

She showed the automatic underneath her pillow. "Perhaps I ought to tell you that Gunnar warned me too. No. Not about the wolf, but El Shabur."

"Worse than a whole pack of wolves," he agreed. "Know where you are with those noisy brutes, but the sheykh's another cup of tea, entirely."

"He gave me this. Told me to tie up my tent with it. Queer, don't you think?"

He examined the plait of colored string with profound interest.

"Jerusalem the Golden! If we ever reach dry land again, this will be an heirloom for you to hand on. That is, unless you're hard up and want to sell it to some Croesus for a sack of diamonds. This, my dear Black-eyed Susan, is a relic dating back thousands of years. The seal, of course, not the threads. It's an emerald. And that's the Eye of Horus cut in it."

"Emerald! It must be fearfully valu-

able. How on earth d'you think Gunnar got it?"

"From his master the sheykh. It's the sort of thing he'd need, poor fellow! It's a safeguard—oh, quite infallible."

"I never know when you're serious or when you're just being idiotic. Protection from what? What does it mean?"

"It means that El Shabur's a cabalist. And that Gunnar is an initiate and pretty far advanced too, to be in possession of this very significant thing. He's gone a long, long way on the road—poor lad!"

"He's in danger?"

"Extreme and imminent danger; there's scarcely a chance to cut him free now. Better face the thing, dear. Gunnar's not in a position to love or marry any woman; he's tied body and soul to El Shabur. It's a hideous, deplorable, ghastly mess, the whole affair." He sat down beside her on the little truckle bed and took her hand. "This is my fault. I knew well enough even at Sollum that there was something abnormal about Gunnar."

"I love him," she answered very quietly, "and nothing can ever alter that. Whatever he's done, or is—I love him."

He stared at her a long minute. "And that's the damn'dest part of the whole show," he remarked with immense gravity.

He turned back at the tent opening. "About that thing Gunnar gave you. Fasten the tent-flap with it if you value your soul; wear it under your dress by day, never let the sheykh catch a glimpse of it. We reach Siwa the day after tomorrow. Try not to let El Shabur know we suspect anything, meantime. Sure you're all right—not afraid?"

"Not for myself. I don't understand what it's all about. But I'm afraid for my poor Gunnar. He's the sort that can't stand alone. Not like you and me, we're too hard-headed old things!"

"You're a wonder. Any other girl stranded here with a half-mad native sorcerer would go right up the pole. Tie up your tent, though, d'you hear?"

"The moment you've gone. Cross my heart!"

NIGHT wore swiftly on. Dale sat smoking in his own tent, fully dressed, alert and expectant. He felt convinced that something was in the wind tonight. The sound of shots far off across the desert took him outside, rifle in hand. Sleep held the camp; not a man had stirred. The black Bedouin tent in which the sheykh slept was closed. No one seemed to have been disturbed except himself. Again came that queer little tug of his senses—a warning of danger near.

His grip tightened on his weapon. He went on more slowly. A shadow seemed to move round the great mass of rock which had sheltered him a few hours ago. He halted half-way between rock and camp. Should he go back and rouse the ment? Or should he go closer and inspect for himself? He walked on.

A high, piping wind blew clouds across the sky. A black mass obscured the moon. He halted once more, turned back to camp in a sudden certainty of peril. Too late. A rush. A scuffle. An arm of steel clasped him from behind, a hand like a vise was clamped across his lips before he could call out. His big body was enormously muscular and he fought like a tiger, threw off his assailant, shouted loudly. The strong wind shouted louder, tore his voice to shreds. It swept the black cloud from the moon too, and he saw a small band of natives, their faces veiled, knives glinting, burnooses bellying out like sails as they shouted and ran at him.

They were too close to take aim. He made for the rock. Unencumbered, and a good sprinter, he reached it safely, stood with his back to it and coolly picked out one after another of his enemies. It was

only a momentary advantage; they were too many for him, and ran in again with savage yells.

To his amazement, a dark long swift body flung itself upon his attackers. A great wolf, huge, shaggy, thin and sudden as a torpedo. In vain the men plunged their knives into its rough pelt. Again and again Dale saw the wicked twisted blades drop as the brute caught the wrists of the raiders in its teeth.

The fight was short. Not a man was killed, but none escaped a wound. Some had faces slashed so that blood ran down and blinded them; some dragged a maimed foot; some a mangled arm. In terror of the swift, silent punishing creature that stood between them and their victim, the raiders turned and fled.

The wolf itself had been damaged in the savage encounter; an ear was torn, and it limped as it ran at the heels of the raiders, chasing them to their camels behind the huge rock pile.

The great panting beast looked full at Dale as it passed by. The man felt his heart beat, beat, beat in slow painful thuds against his chest. The creature's yellow, bloodshot eyes turned on him with a glance that cut deeper than any raider's knife. He leaned back. He felt very sick. The vast desert seemed to heave.

Slowly, soberly he made his way back to camp. He did not so much as glance back at the wolf. He knew now. He *knew!*

SIWA! Actually Siwa at last! The strange fort-like city loomed before the thin line of camels and their dusty weary riders. Like a vast house of cards Siwa had risen up and up from the plain. On its foundation of rock, one generation after another had built; father for son, father for son again; one story on another, the sun-baked mud and salt of its walls almost indistinguishable from the rock itself.

Tiny windows flecked the massive precipitous piles. Vast hives of life, these buildings. Layer upon layer, narrowing from their rocky base into turrets and towers and minarets.

Dale's eyes were for Merle, however. She rode beside him, her face so white and strained, her eyes so anxious that he was torn with doubt. Ought he to have told her Gunnar's secret? He had not turned up since the desert fight. Merle was sick with anxiety. Sheykh El Shabur smiled in his beard as he saw her quivering underlip, her glance that looked about with ever increasing fear.

"Where is he? Where is he?" She turned upon the sheykh. "You said he would be here at Siwa, waiting for us. Where is he?" she demanded.

Dale could have laughed had the situation been less grave and horrible. She loved as she hated, with her whole strong vigorous soul and body. She tackled the sinister, haughty Arab, demanding of him the man she loved, with the fearlessness of untried youth.

She was worth dying for, his little Merle! And it looked as though he, and she too, would make a finish here in this old barbaric city. If he had to go, he would see to it that she was not left behind, to be a sacrifice on some blood-stained ancient altar hewn in the rock beneath the city, to die slowly and horribly that the lust of Melek Taos should be appeased, to die in body—to live on in soul, slave to Sheykh Zura El Shabur.

And Gunnar? It was unnerving to think what might be happening to him. Dale knew that Gunnar had saved his life as surely as that El Shabur had plotted to kill him two nights ago. It was not nice to consider how the cabalist might punish this second interference of his young disciple.

They rode on through an endless warren of twisting dark lanes. Dale dropped behind Merle and the Arab when only two could ride abreast; he liked to have El Shabur before his eyes when possible. He could see Merle talking earnestly. Her companion seemed interested, his hands moved in quick eloquent gesture, he seemed reassuring her on some point. Gunnar, surely! No other subject in common could exist between those two.

Past the date-markets, under the shadow of the square white tomb of Sidi Suliman, past palm-shaded gardens, until they reached a hill shaped like a sugar-loaf and honeycombed with tombs.

"The Hill of the Dead!" El Shabur waved a lean dark hand.

"Quite," replied Dale. "It looks like it."

The Arab pointed to the white Rest-House built on a level terrace cut in the hillside. "It is there that travelers stay—such as come to Siwa."

"Very appropriate. One does associate rest with tombs, after all."

Merle looked up at the remarkable hill with blank, uninterested gaze.

"Ilbrahaim will take your camels. If you will dismount here! The *fonduk* is on the other side of the city."

The sheykh dismounted as he spoke. He sent the servant off with the weary beasts, and left the cousins with a *salaam* to Dale and a deep mocking obeisance to the girl. They watched him out of sight. The hood of his black burnoose obscured head and face; its wide folds, dark and ominous as the sable wings of a bird of prey, swung to his proud free walk. They sighed with relief as the tall figure vanished in Siwa's gloomy narrow streets.

"What were you two chinning about on the way here?" Dale steered the exhausted girl up the steep rocky path. "You seemed to goad our friend to unusual eloquence."

"I was asking about Gunnar. What else is there to say to him? Oh, do look at that!"

Below stretched rolling sandy dunes, palm groves, distant ranges of ragged peaks, the silver glint of a salt lake, and a far-off village on the crest of a rocky summit in the east.

He looked, not at the extraordinary beauty of desert, hill and lake, but at Merle. She had switched the conversation abruptly. Also, she was gazing out over the desert with eyes that saw nothing before them. He was certain of that. She was keyed up—thinking, planning, anticipating something. What? He knew she'd made up her mind to action, and guessed it was concerned with Gunnar. Long experience had taught him the futility of questioning her.

THEY found the Rest-House surprizingly clean and cool. Ilbrahaim presently returned to look after them. No other guests were there.

It was getting on toward evening when Dale was summoned to appear before the Egyptian authorities and report on his visit. He knew the easily offended, touchy character of local rulers and authorities, and that it was wise to obey the summons. But about Merle!

He glanced at her over the top of a map he was pretending to study.

"Would you care to come along with me across the city? Or will you stay here with Ilbrahaim and watch the sunset? Famous here, I've read."

"Yes," she replied, her eyes on a pencil sketch she was making of the huddled roofs seen from an open window where she sat.

"My fault, I'll start again! *A*—Will you come with me? *B*—Will you stay with Ilbrahaim?"

"*B*." She looked up for a moment, then returned to her sketch.

He got the impression of peculiar and sudden relief in her eyes, as if the problem had solved itself.

"Wants to get me off the scene!" he told himself.

She stopped further uneasy speculation on his part by bringing her sketch across and plunging into technical details about it. He was a sound critic and was beguiled into an enthusiastic discourse on architecture. She listened and argued and discussed points with flattering deference, until the sun was low and vast and crimson in the west.

Then she casually remarked, "You needn't go now, surely?"

He started up. "I'd completely forgotten my little call. Sorry, dear, to leave you even for an hour. Etiquette's extremely stiff on these small formalities; better go, I think. 'Bye, old lady, don't go wandering about."

"Thank heaven, he's gone!" Merle thrust her drawings into a portfolio, put on a hat, scrutinized her pale face in her compact-mirror, applied lipstick and rouge with an artist's hand, and walked down the hill path.

At its junction with the dusty road, a tall black-clad figure joined her.

"You are punctual, *Mademoiselle!* That is well, for we must be there before sunset."

It seemed an interminable walk to her as they dived and twisted through a labyrinth of courtyards, flights of steps, and overshadowed narrow streets. She followed her silent guide closely. It would be unpleasant to lose even such a grim protector as El Shabur. She shrank from the filthy whining beggars with their rags and sores, from the bold evil faces of the young men who stood to stare at her. Even the children revolted her—pale unhealthy abnormal little creatures that they were.

The sheykh hurried on through the old town with its towering fort-like houses to newer Siwa. Here the dwellings were only of two or three stories with open roofs that looked like great stone boxes shoved hastily together in irregular blocks.

EL SHABUR looked at the sun, then turned to his companion with such malice in his black eyes that she shrank from him.

"He is here."

She looked up at the house-front with its tiny windows and fought back the premonition of horror that made her throat dry and her heart beat heavily. She despised her weakness. Inside this sinister house, behind one of those dark slits of windows, Gunnar was waiting for her.

Why he'd not come to her, why she must visit him secretly with El Shabur, she refused to ask herself. She loved him. She was going to be with him. The rest did not count at all.

She followed her guide through a low entrance door, stumbled up a narrow dark stairway, caught glimpses of bare, untenanted, low-ceilinged rooms. El Shabur opened a door at the top of the house, drew back with a flash of white teeth. She stooped to enter the low doorway.

"Gunnar!"

There was no answer in words, but from the shadows a figure limped, his face and head cut and bleeding, so gaunt, so shadow-like too, that she cried out again.

"Oh! Oh, my dear!"

He took her in his arms. She clasped him, drew his head down to hers, kissed the gray tortured face with passionate love and pity.

"Gunnar, I am here with you! Look at me! What is it?—tell me, darling, let me help you!"

His eyes met hers in such bitter despair and longing that she clutched him to her again, pressing her face against his shoul-

der. With gentle touch he put her from him.

"Listen to me, Merle, my darling. My beloved! Listen carefully. This is the last time I shall see you—touch you—for ever. I am lost—lost and damned. In a moment you will see for yourself. That is why he brought you here. Remember that I love you more than the soul I have lost—always—always, Merle!"

He pushed her from him, retreated to the shadows, stood there with head flung up and back pressed to the gray mud wall. Even as she would have gone to him, he changed, swiftly, dreadfully! Down—down in the dust—torn rough head and yellow wolf's eyes at her feet.

MERLE sat up on the broad divan. Dale had returned to find her walking up and down, up and down the long main room of the Rest-House. For long he had been unable to distract her mind from the terrible inner picture that tormented her. She would answer his anxious questions with an impatient glance of wild distracted eyes, then begin her endless restless pacing again.

She had drunk the strong sedative he gave her as if her body were acting independently of her mind, but the drug had acted. She had slept. Now she was awake and turned to the man who watched beside her—large, protecting, compassionate. She tried to tell him, but her voice refused to put the thing into words.

"My dear child, don't! Don't! I know what you saw."

"You know! You've seen him when—when——" She covered her face, then slipped from the divan and stood erect before him.

"Dale! I'm all right now. It was so inhuman, such a monstrous unbelievable thing! But he has to bear it—live through it. And we *must* talk about it. We have to help him. Dale! Dale! Surely there is a way to free him?"

He took her hands in his, swallowed hard before he could command his voice. "My chi——" He broke off abruptly.

There was nothing left of the child! It was a very resolute woman whose white face and anguished eyes confronted him. She looked, she was in effect, ten years older. He could not insult her by anything but the whole unvarnished truth now. She must make the final decision herself. He must not, he dare not withhold his knowledge. It would be a betrayal. Of her. Of Gunnar. Of himself.

"Merle!"

At the tightening of his clasp, the new note in his voice, she looked up with a passion of renewed hope.

"There is—there is a way?"

He nodded, and drew her down beside him on the divan. He looked ill and shaken all at once. His tongue felt stiff, as if it would not frame words. It was like pushing her over a precipice, or into a blazing fire. How cruel love was! Hers for Gunnar. His for Merle. Love that counted—it was always a sharp sword in the heart.

"There is a way," his hoarse voice made effort. "It's a way that depends on your love and courage. Those two things alone—love and courage! It's a test of both, a most devilish test, so dangerous that the chances are you will not survive it. And if you don't——"

For a moment he bowed his head, put a hand up to shield his face from her wide eager gaze.

"Dear! It's a test, a trial of your will against that fiend, El Shabur. There are ancient records. It has been done. Only one or two survived the ordeal. The others perished—damned—lost as Gunnar is!"

"No." The low, softly breathed word

was more impressive than a defiant blare of trumpets. "He is not lost, for I shall save him. Tell me what to do."

EL SHABUR listened in silence, looked from Merle's white worn face to Dale's maddening smile. He had not expected resistance. He had not thought this lovesick girl would try to win back her lover. The man was at the back of it, of course. Had taught her the formula, no doubt. Should he stoop to take up the gage to battle—with a woman?

"First time your bluff's ever been called, eh, Sheykh of the Mist? Are you meditating one of your famous disappearances? Am I trying you a peg too high? It is, of course, a perilous experiment—this trial of will between you and my little cousin!"

The Arab's white teeth gleamed in a mocking, mirthless smile. His eyes showed two dark flames that flared up hotly at the taunt.

"You cannot save him. He is mine, my creature, my slave."

"Not for long, Sheykh El Shabur," the girl spoke softly.

"For ever," he suavely corrected her. "And you also put yourself in my hands by this foolish test—which is no test!"

Dale stood watching near the door of the Rest-House. Could this be the child he had known so well, this resolute stern little figure, whose stedfast look never wavered from the Arab's face?—who spoke to him with authority on which his evil sneering contempt broke like waves on a rock?

"You think that you—a woman, can withstand me? A vain trifling woman, and one, moreover, who is overburdened by lust for my servant as a frail craft by heavy cargo. I will destroy you with your lover."

"I don't take your gloomy view of the situation," Dale interrupted. He watched the other intently from under drooped eyelids, saw that Merle's fearlessness and his own refusal to be serious were piercing the man's colossal self-esteem, goading him to accept the challenge to his power. El Shabur felt himself a god on earth. In so far as he was master of himself, he was a god! Dale had never met so disciplined and powerful a will. Few could boast so controlled and obedient an intellect. But he was proud, as the fallen Lucifer was proud!

It was the ultimate weakness of all who dabbled in occult powers. They were forced to take themselves with such profound seriousness that in the end the fine balance of sanity was lost.

Dale continued as if they were discussing a trifling matter that began to bore him. His mouth was so dry that he found difficulty in speaking at all. It was like stroking an asp.

"The point is that I have never seen our young friend take this extraordinary semblance of a—a werewolf. My cousin is, as you remark so emphatically, a woman. Not her fault, and all that, of course! But no doubt she was over-sensitive, imaginative, conjured up that peculiar vision of our absent Gunnar by reason of excessive anxiety."

"She saw my disobedient servant," the sheykh's deep voice rang like steel on an anvil, "undergoing punishment. It was no delusion of the senses."

"Ah! Good! Excellent! You mean she was not so weak, after all. That's one up to her, don't you think? I mean, seeing him as he really was. Rather penetrating, if you take me!"

"She saw what she saw, because it was my design that she should. She is no more than a woman because of it."

"Ah, I can't *quite* agree there." Dale was persuasive, anxious to prove his point politely. "I'll bet she didn't scream or

faint. Just trotted home a bit wobbly at the knees, perhaps?"

"She is obstinate, as all women are obstinate." The sheykh's lean hands were hidden by flowing sleeves, to Dale's disgust; but a muscle twitched above the high cheek-bone, and the dark fire of his eyes glowed red.

"Since you desire to sacrifice yourself," the Arab turned to Merle, "Ilbrahaim shall bring you just before sundown to the house."

"Any objections to my coming along?" Dale spoke as if a supper-party were under discussion. "My interest in magic-ceremonial——"

El Shabur cut in. "You think to save her from me? Ah, do I not know of your learning, your researches, your study of occult mysteries! It will avail you nothing. No other cabalist has dared what I have dared. I—the High Priest of Melek Taos! Power is mine. No man clothed in flesh can stand against me."

He seemed, in the dim low-ceilinged room, to fill the place with wind and darkness and the sound of beating wings. Suddenly he was gone. Like a black cloud he was gone.

Dale looked after him for long tense minutes. "No man clothed in flesh," he quoted reflectively. "And there's quite a lot of clothing in my case, too."

ONCE more the grim stone house in the outskirts of the city. The cousins stood before it. Ilbrahaim, who had guided them, put a hand before his face in terror.

"*Effendi,* I go! This is an evil place." The whites of his eyes glinted between outspread fingers. "An abode of the *shaitans!*"

He turned, scuttled under a low archway. They heard the agitated clap-clap of his heelless slippers on hard-baked earth. Then silence closed round about them. They stood in the warm glow of approaching sunset.

Merle looked at the western sky and the great globe that was remorselessly bringing day to a close. Dale studied her grave, set face. He hoped against hope that she might even now turn back. Her eyes were on the round red sun as it sank.

He too stared as if hypnotized. If he could hold it—stop its slow fatal moving on . . . on. . . . It was drawing Merle's life with it. It was vanishing into darkness and night. Merle too would vanish into darkness . . . into awful night. . . .

She turned and smiled at him. The glory of the sky touched her pale face with fire. Her eyes shone solemn and clear as altar lamps. He gave one last glance at the lovely earth and sky and glorious indifferent sun, then opened the low door for Merle to pass.

Gunnar, in the upper room, stood by the narrow slit of his solitary window, more gaunt, more shadowy than yesterday. He saw Merle, rushed across to her, pushed her violently back across the threshold.

"I will not have it! This monstrous sacrifice! Take her away—at once. Go! I refuse it. Take her away!"

He thrust her back into Dale's arms, tried to close the door in their faces. Once more a faint hope of rescuing Merle at the eleventh hour rose in Dale's mind. But the door was flung wide. El Shabur confronted them, led them into the room, imperiously motioned Gunnar aside.

"*Ya!* Now is it too late to turn back. My hour is come. My power is upon me. Let Melek Taos claim his own!"

Merle went over to Gunnar, took his hand in hers, looked up into his gray face with the same look of shining inner ex-

altation Dale had seen as they lingered at the outer door.

"Yes, it is too late now to turn back," she affirmed. "For this last time you must endure your agony. The last time, Gunnar—my beloved. It shall swiftly pass to me. Can I not bear for a brief moment what you have borne so long? Through my soul and body this devil that possesses you shall pass to El Shabur, who created it. Endure for my sake, as I for yours."

"No! No! You cannot guess the agony—the torture——"

Dale sprang forward at her gesture, and drew about them a circle with oil poured from a long-necked phial. Instantly the two were shut within a barrier of fire, blue as wood-hyacinths, that rose in curving, swaying, lovely pillars to the ceiling, transforming the gray salt mud to a night-sky lit with stars.

"Ya gomány! O mine enemy!" El Shabur's deep voice held sudden anguish. "Is it thou? Through all the years thy coming has been known to me, yet till now I knew thee not. Who taught thee such power as this?"

He strode to the fiery circle, put out a hand, drew it back scorched and blackened to the bone. He turned in savage menace. Dale's hand flashed, poured oil in a swift practised fling about El Shabur's feet and touched it to leaping flame.

Within this second ring the Arab stood upright. His voice boomed out like a great metal gong.

"Melek Taos! Melek Taos! Have I not served thee truly? Give aid—give aid! Ruler of Wind and Stars and Fire! I am held in chains!"

Dale breathed in suffocating gasps. He was cold to the marrow of his bones. He lost all sense of time—of space. He was hanging somewhere in the vast gulf of eternity. Hell battled for dominion in earth and sea and sky.

"To me, Abeor! Aberer! Chavajoth! Aid—give aid!" Again the great voice called upon his demon-gods.

A sudden shock made the room quiver. Dale saw that the fires grew pale. "Was I too soon? Too soon?" he asked himself in agony. "If the oil burns out before sundown——"

There was a crash. On every hand the solid ancient walls were riven. Up—up leaped the blue fiery pillars.

A shout of awful appeal. "Melek Taos! Master! Give aid!"

With almost blinded eyes, Dale saw Gunnar drop at Merle's feet, saw in his stead a wolf-shape crouching, saw her stoop to it, kneel, kiss the great beast between the eyes, heard her clear, steady voice repeat the words of power, saw the flames sink and leap again.

The issue was joined. Now! Now! God or Demon! The Arab, devil-possessed, calling on his gods. Merle, fearless before the onrush of his malice. Hate, cruel as the grave. Love, stronger than death.

Dale's breath tore him. Cold! Cold! Cold to the blood in his veins! God! it was upon her!

Gunnar stood in his own body, staring with wild eyes at the beast which brushed against his knee. He collapsed beside it, blind and deaf to further agony.

And still El Shabur's will was undefeated. Still beside the unconscious Gunnar stood a wolf, its head flung up, its yellow lambent eyes fixed, remote, suffering.

Again Dale felt himself a tiny point of conscious life swung in the womb of time. Again the forces that bear up the earth, sun, moon, and stars were caught in chaos and destruction. Again he heard the roar of fire and flood and winds that drive the seas before them. Through all the tumult there rang a voice, rallying hell's legions, waking old dark

gods, calling from planet to planet, from star to star, calling for aid!

Dale knew himself on earth again. Stillness was about him. In a dim and dusty room he saw Merle and Gunnar, handfast, looking into each other's eyes. About their feet a little trail of fire ran—blue as a border of gentian.

Another circle showed, its fires dead, black ash upon the dusty ground. Across it sprawled a body, its burnoose charred and smoldering. Servant of Melek Taos. Victim of his own dark spells. El Shabur destroyed by the demon that had tormented Gunnar. Driven forth, homeless, it returned to him who had created it.

The Medici Boots

By PEARL NORTON SWET

The amethyst-covered boots had been worn by an evil wanton in medieval Florence—but what malefic power did they carry over into our own time?

FOR fifty years they lay under glass in the Dickerson museum and they were labeled "The Medici Boots." They were fashioned of creamy leather, pliable as a young girl's hands. They were threaded with silver, appliqued with sapphire silks and scarlet, and set on the tip of each was a pale and lovely amethyst. Such were the Medici boots.

Old Silas Dickerson, globe-trotter and collector, had brought the boots from a dusty shop in Florence when he was a young man filled with the lust for travel and adventure. The years passed and Silas Dickerson was an old man, his hair white, his eyes dim, his veined hands trembling with the ague that precedes death.

When he was ninety and the years of his wanderings over, Silas Dickerson died one morning as he sat in a high-backed Venetian chair in his private museum. The Fourteenth Century gold-leaf paintings, the Japanese processional banners, the stolen bones of a Normandy saint—all the beloved trophies of his travels must have watched the dead man impassively for hours before his housekeeper found him.

The old man sat with his head thrown back against the faded tapestry of the Venetian chair, his eyes closed, his bony arms extended along the beautifully carved arms of the chair, and on his lap lay the Medici boots.

It was high noon when they found him, and the sun was streaming through the stained-glass window above the chair and picking at the amethysts, so that the violet stones seemed to eye Marthe, the

"She imparted to me those terrible secrets of the Black Arts which were deep in her soul."

old housekeeper, with an impudent glitter. Marthe muttered a prayer and crossed herself, before she ran like a scared rabbit with the news of the master's death.

SILAS DICKERSON'S only surviving relatives, the three young Delameters, did not take too seriously the note which was found among the papers in the museum's desk. Old Silas had written the note. It was addressed to John Delameter, for John was his uncle's favorite, but John's pretty wife, Suzanne, and his twin brother, Doctor Eric, read it over his shoulder; and they all smiled tolerantly. Old Dickerson had written of things incomprehensible to the young moderns:

"The contents of my private museum are yours, John, to do with as you see fit. Merely as a suggestion, I would say that the Antiquarian Society would snap up many of the things. A very few are of no particular value, except to me. One thing I want done, however. The Medici boots of ivory leather must either be de-

stroyed or be put for ever under glass in a *public* museum. I prefer that they be destroyed, for they are a dangerous possession. They have gone to the adulterous rendezvous celebrated in the scandalous verses of Lorenzo the Magnificent. They have shod the feet of a murderess. They were cursed by the Church as trappings of the Devil, inciting the wearer to foul deeds and intrigue.

"I shall not disturb you with all their hideous history, but I repeat, they are a dangerous possession. I have taken care to keep them under lock and key, behind plate glass, for more than fifty years. I have never taken them out. Destroy the Medici boots, before they destroy you!"

"But he did take them out!" cried Suzanne. "Uncle was holding the boots when—when Marthe found him there in the museum."

John reread the note, and looked thoughtfully at his young wife. "Yes. Perhaps he was preparing to destroy them right then. Of course, I think the poor old fellow took things a bit too seriously—he was very old, you know, and Marthe says he practically lived in this museum of his."

"And why call a pair of old boots dangerous? Of course, we all know the Medicis were plenty dangerous, but the Medici boots—that's ridiculous, John. Besides——"

Suzanne paused provocatively, her red lips pouting. She looked down at her trimly shod feet. "Besides, I'd like to try on those Medici boots—just once. They're lovely, I think."

John was frowning thoughtfully. He scarcely heard her suggestion. He spoke to Eric, instead, and his voice seemed a bit troubled.

"I believe that Uncle *was* getting ready to destroy those boots that very morning he died; else why should he have taken them from their case—after fifty years?"

"Yes, I believe you're right, John, because that note is dated fully a month before Uncle's death. I think he brooded over leaving those boots to one he cared for. Poor old man!"

"I wouldn't call him so, Eric. He had his dreams of adventure realized more fully than most men. I—I think I'll do as he says. I'll destroy the Medici boots."

"If you'd feel better about it," assented his brother. But Suzanne did not speak. She was looking at her shoe, pursing her lips thoughtfully, seeing her feet encased in the gay embroideries of the Medici boots.

John seemed relieved by his decision. "Yes, I'd better do it. We'll be getting back to town in a few days. Old Erskine, you know, Uncle's lawyer, is coming down this afternoon. Then soon we'll be on the wing, Susie and I—Vienna, Paris, the Alps—thanks to Uncle."

"Maybe you think I'm not thankful for my chance at a bit more work at Johns Hopkins," said Eric, and they did not again speak of the Medici boots.

THE deaf old lawyer of the Dickerson estate arrived, and Suzanne, with the easy capability that was part of her charm, saw that he was made comfortable.

At seven there was a perfect dinner served on the awninged terrace outside the softly lit living-room. The stars aided the two little rosy lamps on the table, and swaying willows beside a stone-encircled pool swung the incense of the garden about them.

As dinner ended, John took from the pocket of his coat a small, limp-leather book. He pushed back his dessert plate and laid the book on the table, tapping it with a finger as he spoke.

"This is the history of the Medici boots. It was in the little wall-safe in the museum. After all Uncle said of the Medici boots, shall we read it?" And turning to the old lawyer, he told of Silas Dickerson's letter concerning the boots.

Erskine shook his head, smiling. "Most collectors get an exaggerated sense of the supernatural. Read this, by all means—it should prove interesting."

"Yes, read it, John." Suzanne and Eric spoke almost together.

So, in the circle of rosy light at their little table, John read the story of the Medici boots. It was not a long story and it was told in the language of an anonymous translator, but as John read on, his listeners were drawn together, as by a spell. They scarcely breathed, and the summer night that was so mildly beautiful seemed to take on a sense of hovering danger.

"In the palace of Giuliano de' Medici I have lived long. I am an old woman now, as the years are reckoned in this infamous place, though I am but fifty and three.

"Separated from my betrothed, duped, sold into the marble labyrinth of this hateful palace, it was long before my spirit broke and I went forth, bejeweled and attired in elegance, among the silk-clad Florentines. I was labeled the most beautiful mistress of any of the Medici. I was smirked at, fawned upon for my lord's favors, obscenely jested about in the orgies that took place in the great banquet hall of the palace.

"But in my heart always lay the remembrance of my lost love, and in my soul grew black hatred for the Medici and all their kind. I, who had dreamed only of a modest home, a kind husband, black-haired, trusting little children, was made a tool of the Medici infamy.

"In time, I almost felt myself in league with the Devil. Secretly, and with a growing sense of elation, I made frequent rendezvous with a foul hag whose very name was anathema to the churchly folk of Florence. In her hole of a room in a certain noisome street, she imparted to me those terrible secrets of the Black Arts which were deep in her soul. It was amusing that she was paid in Medici gold.

"The corruption of the Medici bred in them fear; in me a sort of reckless bravery. It was I who poisoned the wine of many a foe of the Medici. It was I who put the point of a dagger in the heart of the old Prince de Vittorio, whose lands and power and palaces were coveted by my lord, Giuliano.

"After a time, bloodshed became an exhilaration to me; the death agonies of those who drank the poisoned cup became more interesting than the flattery of the Medici followers. Even the ladies of the house of the Medici did me the honor of their subtly barbed friendliness.

"Through this very friendliness, I conceived my plan of sweet revenge upon the monsters who had ruined my life. With so great a hatred boiling in my soul that my mind reeled, my senses throbbed, my heart rose in my throat like a spurt of flame, I cursed three things of exquisite beauty with all the fervor of my newly learned lessons in devilish lore.

"These three beautiful objects I presented to three ladies of the house of Medici—presented them with honeyed words of mock humility. A necklace of jeweled links—I pledged myself to the Devil and willed that the golden necklace would tighten on the soft throat of a lady of the Medici while she slept, and strangle her into black death. A bracelet of filigree and sapphires—to pierce by its hidden silver needle the blue vein in a white Medici wrist, so that her life's

blood would spurt and she would know the terror that the house of the Medici gave to others.

"Last, and most ingenious, a pair of creamy boots, pliable, embroidered in silver and silks, encrusted with amethysts—my betrothal jewels. In my hatred I cursed the boots, willing that the wearer, as long as a shred of the boots remained, should kill as I had killed, poison as I had poisoned, leave all thoughts of home and husband and live in wantonness and evil. So I cursed the beautiful boots, forgetting, in my hate, that perhaps another than a Medici might, in the years to come, wear them and become the Devil's pawn, even as I am now.

"In my life, the Medici will have the boots, of that I feel sure; but after that—I can only hope that this bloody history of the boots may be found when I am no more, and may it be a warning.

"I have lived to see my gifts received and worn, and I have laughed in my soul to see my curses bring death and terror and evil to three Medici women. I know not what will become of the golden necklace, the bracelet, or the boots. The boots may be lost or stolen, or they may lie in a Medici palace for age on age, but the curse will cling to them till they are destroyed. So I pray that no woman, save a Medici, will ever wear them.

"As I live and breathe and do the bidding of the lords of Florence, the accursed Medici—I have told the truth. When I am dead, perhaps they will find this book, and, in hell, I shall know and be glad.

"MARIA MODENA DI CAVOURI.
"Florence, 1476."

"WHEW!" said old Erskine.

John laughed. "I don't suppose this charming history would have been any more thrilling if I had read it from the original book, in Italian, of course. Wonder where Uncle got it! There was no mention of it being in the library—but there it was."

"Now, will you destroy those boots?" asked Eric, and he was not entirely in jest.

But Suzanne said, laughingly, "Not before I find out if the Medici lady had a smaller foot than I! Are they still in the museum, John?"

"Never you mind, my dear. They're not for the likes of you."

"Oh, don't be silly, John. This is 1935, not the Fifteenth Century." And they laughed at Suzanne's earnestness.

The book that held the story of the Medici boots lay on the white cloth, looking like a book of lovely verse.

Suzanne, a small white blur against the summer dark, sat quietly while the men talked of Silas Dickerson, his life, his mania for collecting, his death that had so fittingly come to him in his museum. It was nearly twelve when Suzanne left the men on the terrace and with a quiet "good-night" entered the living-room and crossed to the long, shining stairs.

The men went on with their talk. Once, John, looking toward the jutting wing that was the museum, exclaimed, "Look at that, will you? Why—I'd swear I saw a light in the museum."

"You locked it, didn't you?" asked Eric.

"Of course; the key's in my desk upstairs. H-m. I'm probably mistaken, but it did seem as though a light shone there just a moment ago."

"Reflection from the living-room window, I think. Country life is making you jittery, John." And Eric laughed at his brother.

The men sat on, reluctant to leave the beauty of the night, and it was almost two o'clock when they finally went inside.

John said, "I think I'll not disturb Suzanne." And he went to sleep in a wide four-postered bed in a room next to his wife. Eric and the old lawyer were in rooms across the hall.

THE still summer night closed about the house of Silas Dickerson, and when the moon lay dying against the bank of cloud, puffed across a sky by the little wind that came before dawn, young Doctor Eric Delameter awoke, suddenly and completely, to a feeling of clammy apprehension. He had not locked his door, and now, across the grayness of the room, he saw it slowly opening.

A hand was closed around the edge of the door—a woman's hand, small and white and jeweled. Eric sat straight and tense on the edge of his bed, peering across the room. A woman, young and slender, in a long, trailing gown, came toward him smiling. It was Suzanne.

With a gasp, Eric watched her approach till she stood directly before him.

"Suzanne! You are asleep? Suzanne, shall I call John?"

He thought that perhaps he should not waken her; there were things one must remember about sleep-walkers, but physicians scarcely believed them.

Eric was puzzled, too, by her costume. It was not a night-robe she wore, but an elaborate, trailing dress upon which embroideries in silver shone faintly. Her short black curls were bound about three times with strands of pearly beads, her slim white arms were loaded with bracelets. The pointed toes of little shoes peeped beneath her gown, little shoes of creamy leather. An amethyst gleamed on each shoe.

The sight of these amethystine tips affected Eric strangely, much as though he had looked at something hideously repulsive. He stood up and put out a hand to touch Suzanne's arm.

"Suzanne," he said, gently. "Let me take you to John. Shall I?"

Suzanne looked up at him, and her brown eyes, usually so merry, were deeply slumberous, not with sleep, but with a look of utter abandon. She shook her pearl-bound head slowly, smilingly.

"No, not John. I want you, Eric."

"Mad! Suzanne must be mad!" was Eric's quick thought, but her caress was swifter than his thought. Both jewel-laden arms about his neck, Suzanne kissed him, her red lips pouting warmly upon his.

"Suzanne! You don't know what you're doing." He grasped both her hands in his and with a haste that would have seemed ludicrous to him had he viewed the scene in a picture-play, he hurried her out of his room and across the hall.

Eric opened her door softly and with no gentle hand shoved Suzanne inside her room. She seemed like a little animal in his grasp. She hissed at him; clawed and scratched at his hand. But when he had shut the door, she did not open it again, and after a moment he went back to his own room.

HIS mouth set in a firm line, his heart beating fast, Eric locked his door with a noiseless turn of the key. It was almost dawn, and the garden lay like a rare pastel outside his window; but Eric saw none of it. He scarcely thought, though his lips moved, as if chaotic words were struggling for utterance.

He looked down at his hand, where two long red scratches oozed a trickle of blood. After he had washed his hand, he lay down on his bed and covered his eyes with his arm, against the picture of Suzanne. Above all else there stood out the gleaming tips of her little shoes, as he had glimpsed them through the dim light of his room when she came toward him.

"She wore the Medici boots! The Medici boots! Suzanne must have taken them from the museum!" Over and over he said it—"The Medici boots! The Medici boots!"

Eric rather dreaded breakfast, but when he came down at eight, to the terrace where a rustic table was set invitingly, he found John and the lawyer awaiting him. John greeted his brother affectionately.

" 'Morning, old boy! Hope you slept well. Why so solemn? Feeling seedy?"

"No, no. I am perfectly all right," Eric replied hastily, relieved that Suzanne was not present. He added with a scarcely noticeable hesitation, "Suzanne not coming down?"

"No," replied John, easily. "She seemed to want to sleep awhile. Sent her regrets. She'll see us at lunch."

John went on. "I certainly had a nightmare last night. Thought a woman in a long, shining dress came into my room and tried to stab me. This morning I found that a glass on my bed-table was overturned and broken, and, by George, I'd cut my wrist on it."

He showed a jagged cut on his wrist. "Take a look, Doctor Eric."

Eric looked at the cut, carefully. "Not bad, but you might have bled to death, had it been a quarter of an inch to the left. If you like, I'll fix it up a bit for you after breakfast."

Eric's voice was calm enough, but his pulse was pounding, his heart sick. All morning he rode through the countryside adjoining the Dickerson estate, but he let the mare go as she liked and where she liked, for his mind was busy with the events of the hour before dawn. He knew that the slash on his brother's wrist was made by steel, not glass. Yet when the ride was over, he could not bring himself to tell John of Suzanne's visit.

"She must have been sleep-walking, though I can't account for the way she was decked out. I've always thought Suzanne extremely modest in her dress, certainly not inclined to load herself with jewelry. And those boots! John must get them today and destroy them, as he said. Silly, perhaps, but——" His thoughts went on and on, always returning to the Medici boots, in spite of himself.

ERIC came back from his ride at eleven o'clock, with as troubled a mind as when he began it. He almost feared to see Suzanne at lunch.

When he did meet her with John and Mr. Erskine on the cool, shaded porch where they lunched, he saw there was nothing to fear. The amorous, clinging woman of the hour before dawn was not there at all. There was only the Suzanne whom Eric knew and loved as a sister.

Here, again, was their merry little Suzanne, somewhat spoiled by her husband, it is true, but a Suzanne sweetly feminine, almost childish in a crisp, white frock and little, low-heeled sandals. Their talk was lazily pleasant—of tennis honors and horses, of the prize delphiniums in the garden, of the tiny maltese kitten which Suzanne had brought up from the stables late that morning and installed in a pink-bowed basket on the porch. She showed the kitten to Eric, handling its tiny paws gently, hushing its plaintive mews with ridiculous pet names.

"Perhaps I'm a bigger fool than I know. Perhaps it never happened, except in a dream," Eric told himself, unhappily. "And yet——"

He looked at the red marks on his hand, marks made by a furious Suzanne in that hour before the dawn. Too, he remembered the cut on John's wrist, the cut so near the vein.

Eric declined John's invitation to go through the museum with him that after-

noon, but he said with a queer sense of diffidence, "While you're there, John, you'd better get rid of the Medici boots. Creepy things to have around, I think."

"They'll be destroyed, all right. But Suzanne is just bound to try them on. I'll get them, though, and do as Uncle said."

Eric remained on the terrace, speculating somewhat on just what John and Suzanne would do, now that the huge fortune of Silas Dickerson was theirs. Eric was not envious of his brother's good luck, and he was thankful for his share in old Silas' generosity.

At five o'clock he entered the hall, just as Suzanne hurried in from the kitchen. She spread our her hands, laughingly.

"With my own fair hands I've made individual almond tortonis for dessert. Cook thinks I'm a wonder! Each masterpiece in a fluted silver dish, silver candies sprinkled on the pink whipped cream! O-oh!"

She made big eyes in mock gluttony. Eric forgot, for a moment, that there ever had been another Suzanne.

"You're nothing but a little girl, Suzie. You with your rhapsodies over pink whipped cream! But it's sweet of you to go to such trouble on a warm afternoon. See you and the whatever-you-call-'ems at dinner!"

"They're tortonis, Eric, tortonis."

Suzanne ran lightly up the stairs. Eric followed more slowly. He entered his room thinking that there were some things which must be explained in this house with the old museum.

TWENTY minutes before dinner Eric and John were on the terrace waiting for Suzanne. John was talkative, which was just as well, as he might have wondered at his brother's silence. Eric was torn between a desire to tell his brother his reluctant suspicions concerning the Medici boots and Suzanne and his inclination to leave things alone till the boots could be destroyed.

He said, diffidently, "John, has Suzanne those—those boots?"

John chuckled. "Why, yes. I saw them in her room. Do you know she went down to the museum last night and took those boots? It *was* a light I saw in the museum. It was her light. Suzanne has ideas. Wants to wear the boots just once, she says, to lay the ghost of this what's-her-name—Maria Modena. Suzanne says she couldn't sleep much last night. Got up early and tried on those boots. Well, I think I'll destroy 'em tomorrow. Uncle's wish, so I'll do it."

"Tried them on, did she? Well, if you should ask me, I'd say that history of the boots was a bit too exciting for Suzanne. It *was* a haunting story. Uncle must have swallowed it, hook, line, and sinker, eh?"

"Of course. His letter showed that. But Suzanne lives in the present, not the past, as Uncle did. I suppose Suzanne will wear those boots, or she won't feel satisfied. I don't exactly like the idea, I must confess."

Something like an electric shock passed through Eric. He said, somewhat breathlessly, "I don't think Suzanne ought to have the Medici boots."

John looked at him curiously and laughed. "I never knew you were superstitious, Eric. But do you really think——"

"I don't know what I think, John. But if she were my wife, I'd take those boots away from her. Uncle may have known what he was talking about."

"Well, I think she's intending to wear them at dinner, so prepare to be dazzled.

Here she is, now. Greetings, sweetheart!"

Suzanne swept across the terrace, her gown goldly shimmering, pearls bound about her head, as Eric had seen her in the dim hour before dawn. Again the rows of bracelets were weighting her slim arms. And she wore the Medici boots, the amethyst tips peeping beneath her shining dress.

John, ever ready for gay clowning, arose and bowed low. "Hail, Empress! A-ah, the dress you got in Florence on our honeymoon, isn't it? And those darned Medici boots!"

Suzanne unsmilingly extended her hand for him to kiss.

John arched an eyebrow, comically. "What's the matter, honey? Going regal on me?" And retaining her hand, he kissed each of her fingers.

Suzanne snatched away her hand, and the glance she gave her husband was one of venomous hauteur. To Eric she turned a look that was an open caress, leaning toward him, putting a hand on his arm, as he stood beside his chair, stern-lipped, with eyes that would not look at John's hurt bewilderment.

The three sat down then, in the low wicker chairs, and waited for dinner—three people with oddly different emotions. John was hurt, slightly impatient with his bride; Eric was furious with Suzanne, though there was in his heart the almost certain knowledge that the Suzanne beside them on the terrace was not the Suzanne they knew, but a cruelly strange woman, the product of a sinister force, unknown and compelling.

No one, looking on Suzanne's red-lipped and heavy-lidded beauty, could miss the knowledge that here was a woman dangerously subtle, carrying a power more devastating than the darting lightning that now and then showed itself over the tree-tops of the garden. Eric began to feel something of this, and there shaped in his mind a wariness, a defense against this woman who was not Suzanne.

"No *al fresco* dining tonight," said John, as the darkening sky was veined by a sudden spray of blue-green light. "Rain on the way. Pretty good storm, I'd say."

"I like it," replied Suzanne, drawing in a deep breath of the sultry air.

John laughed. "Since when, sweetheart? You usually shake and shiver through a thunderstorm."

Suzanne ignored him. She smiled at Eric and said in a low tone, "And if I should lose my bravery, you would take care of me, wouldn't you, Eric?"

Before Eric could reply, dinner was announced, and he felt a relief and also a dread. This dinner was going to be difficult.

John offered his arm to his wife, smiling at her, hoping for a smile in return, but Suzanne shrugged and said in a caressing voice, "Eric?"

ERIC could only bow stiffly and offer his arm, while John walked slowly beside them, his face thoughtful, his gay spirits gone. During dinner, however, he tried to revive the lagging conversation. Suzanne spoke in a staccato voice and her choice of words seemed strange to Eric, almost as though she were translating her own thoughts from a foreign tongue.

And finally Suzanne's promised dessert came, cool and tempting in its silver dishes. Eric saw a chance to make the talk more natural. He said, gayly, "Johnny, your wife's a chef, a famous pastry chef. Behold the work of her hands! What did you say it was, Suzanne?"

"This? Oh—I do not know what it is called."

"But this afternoon as you were leaving the kitchen—didn't you say it was almond something or other?"

She shook her head, smiling. "Perhaps it is. I wouldn't know."

The maid had placed the tray with the three silver dishes of dessert before Suzanne, that she might put on them the final sprinkling of delicate silver candies. Daintily, Suzanne sifted the shining bubbles over the fluff of cream. Eric, watching her, felt very little surprize when he saw Suzanne, with almost legerdemain deftness, sift upon one dish a film of pinkish powder which could not be detected after it lay on the pink cream.

Waiting, he knew not for what moment, he watched Suzanne pass the silver dishes herself, saw her offer the one with the powdered top to John. And it was then that their attention was attracted by the entrance of the maltese kitten. So tiny it was, so brave in its careening totter across the shiny floor, small tail hoisted like a sail, that John and Eric laughed aloud.

Suzanne merely glanced down at the little creature and turned away. The kitten, however, came to her chair, put up a tiny paw and caught its curved claws in the fragile stuff of Suzanne's gown. Instantly, her face became distorted with rage and she kicked out at the kitten, savagely, and with set lips. It seemed to Eric that the amethysts on the Medici boots winked wickedly in the light of the big chandelier.

The kitten was flung some ten feet away, and lay in a small, panting heap.

John sprang up. "Suzanne! How could you?" He took the kitten in his arms and soothed it.

"Why its heart's beating like a triphammer," he said. "I don't understand, Suzanne——"

As the kitten grew quiet, he took a large rose-leaf from the table-flowers and spread it with a heaping spoonful of the pink cream from his dessert. Then he put the kitten on the floor beside it.

"Here, little one. Lick this up. It's fancy eating. Suzanne's sorry. I know she is."

The kitten, with the greed of its kind, devoured the cream, covering its small nose and whiskers with a pinkish film. Suzanne sat back in her chair, fingering her bracelets, her eyes on Eric's face. John watched the kitten, and Eric watched, too—watched tensely, for he sensed what would happen to it.

The kitten finished the cream, licked its paws and whiskers and turned to walk away. Then it spun around in a frantic convulsion, and in a moment lay dead on its back, its tiny red tongue protruding, its paws rigid.

Outside, the storm glowered, and in the chartreuse light of the forked lightning, the great chandelier was turned to a sickly radiance. Thunder rolled like muffled drums.

Suddenly Suzanne began to laugh, peal after peal of terrible laughter, and then, after a glare of lightning, the big chandelier winked out. The room was plunged into stormy darkness, and they could hear the rain lashing through the garden to hurl itself against the windows.

"Don't be frightened, Suzanne." It was John's solicitous voice, and it was followed by a quick movement from Suzanne's side of the table.

A sheet of blue-green light illumined the room for an instant, and Eric saw Suzanne struggling in her husband's arms, one jeweled arm uplifted and in her hand a shining dagger.

WITH a bound that was almost involuntary, Eric reached them and struck at the knife in Suzanne's hand. It clattered to the floor. And as though the

fury of the storm and Suzanne's madness both were spent, the slashing rain and the lightning stopped abruptly, and Suzanne ceased to struggle.

"Light the candles, Eric—quickly—on the mantel to your right! Suzanne is hurt!"

In the candle-light, palely golden and swaying, Eric saw Suzanne slumped limply in John's arms. The hem of her golden dress was redly wet and one cream-colored little shoe was fast becoming soaked with blood from a slash across the instep.

"Let's get her over to the window-seat, Eric. Do something for her!—Oh, sweetheart, don't moan like that!" There was no question or reproach in John's voice, only compassion.

Eric took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves. His mouth was grimly set, his hands steady, his voice crisply professional. "Take off those shoes, John. She'll —be herself, then. I mean that she'll be Suzanne—not a murderess of the Medicis. Take them off, John! They're at the bottom of this."

"You mean——" John's voice was breathless, his lips trembling.

"I mean those hellish boots have changed Suzanne from a sweet and lovely girl to—well, do as I tell you. I'll be back with gauze and some things I need."

When Eric hurried back, there were three servants grouped at the dining-room door. He spoke to them bruskly and they left, wide-eyed and whispering. Eric closed the door.

While the wet leaves tapped against the windows and stars struggled through the clouds, Eric worked, silently, expertly, grimly, by the light of a flashlight held in John's unsteady hands and the light of the flickering candles. The house lights were all snuffed out by the storm.

"There," Eric gave a satisfied grunt. The brothers stood looking at Suzanne, who seemed asleep. Her golden dress glimmered in the candle-light and the pearls were slipping from her dark hair. The Medici boots lay in a limp and bloody heap in a corner, where Eric had flung them.

"When she awakes, I shouldn't tell her about any of this, if I were you, John."

"There are things you haven't told me, Eric, aren't there? Things about—the Medici boots?"

Eric looked steadily at his brother. "Yes, old fellow; and after I've told you, those boots must be destroyed. We'll burn them before this night is over. We mustn't move her now. We'll go out on the terrace—it's wet there, but the air is fresh. Did you smell—something peculiar?"

For, as they passed the corner where the Medici boots lay slashed and bloody, Eric could have sworn that there came to him a horrid odor, fetid, hotly offensive —the odor of iniquity and ancient bloody death.

"You can never reach the coast. There is no escape from Xuchotl."

Red Nails

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

One of the strangest stories ever written—the tale of a barbarian adventurer, a woman pirate, and a weird roofed city inhabited by the most peculiar race of men ever spawned

The Story Thus Far

VALERIA, a woman pirate forced by circumstances to join a mercenary army stationed on the Stygian-Darfar border, killed an officer who insulted her and deserted, fleeing into the wilderness that lay to the south. Conan, a Cimmerian, followed her, and caught up with her in a forest after a long pursuit. Conan was enamored of her, but

This story began in WEIRD TALES for July

she was suspicious and resentful. While they argued, a dragon, prehistoric survival of a forgotten age, killed their horses, and the adventurers took refuge on a rocky crag, whence they sighted a plain beyond the forest and a city in the plain.

Conan killed the dragon with a spear dipped in the juice of a poisonous fruit, and they made their way to the city. They found it apparently deserted — a weird place, built all under one roof, without open streets, the halls and chambers illuminated by the means of burning jewels in the ceilings, and all the floors composed of red stone that smoldered like flame.

While exploring it, they became temporarily separated, and Valeria was amazed to see a dark-skinned man of repulsive appearance slinking with evident fear and caution along a hallway. She followed him, on a gallery above the hall, and presently saw him again, lying on the floor with his throat cut. Another man similar to the first appeared, who was overwhelmed with fright at the sight of the corpse. As he turned to flee, a hideous apparition appeared wearing a luminous skull whose effect was hypnotic upon the onlooker. Valeria cut the thing down, disclosing it as a man wearing the enchanted skull of an ancient wizard.

The man she had rescued told her he was called Techotl, and the name of the city was Xuchotl. He told her his people, the Tecuhltli, dwelt in the western part of the city, and another clan, their enemies, the Xotalancas, dwelt in the eastern part. He was urging her to follow him to Tecuhltli when four Xotalancas rushed in upon them.

The story continues:

She killed the first who came within reach before he could strike a blow, her long straight blade splitting his skull even as his own sword lifted for a stroke. She side-stepped a thrust, even as she parried a slash. Her eyes danced and her lips smiled without mercy. Again she was Valeria of the Red Brotherhood, and the hum of her steel was like a bridal song in her ears.

Her sword darted past a blade that sought to parry, and sheathed six inches of its point in a leather-guarded midriff. The man gasped agonizedly and went to his knees, but his tall mate lunged in, in ferocious silence, raining blow on blow so furiously that Valeria had no opportunity to counter. She stepped back coolly, parrying the strokes and watching for her chance to thrust home. He could not long keep up that flailing whirlwind. His arm would tire, his wind would fail; he would weaken, falter, and then her blade would slide smoothly into his heart. A sidelong glance showed her Techotl kneeling on the breast of his antagonist and striving to break the other's hold on his wrist and to drive home a dagger.

Sweat beaded the forehead of the man facing her, and his eyes were like burning coals. Smite as he would, he could not break past nor beat down her guard. His breath came in gusty gulps, his blows began to fall erratically. She stepped back to draw him out—and felt her thighs locked in an iron grip. She had forgotten the wounded man on the floor.

Crouching on his knees, he held her with both arms locked about her legs, and his mate croaked in triumph and began working his way around to come at her from the left side. Valeria wrenched and tore savagely, but in vain. She could free herself of this clinging menace with a downward flick of her sword, but in that instant the curved blade of the tall warrior would crash through her skull. The wounded man began to worry at her bare thigh with his teeth like a wild beast.

She reached down with her left hand and gripped his long hair, forcing his

head back so that his white teeth and rolling eyes gleamed up at her. The tall Xotalanc cried out fiercely and leaped in, smiting with all the fury of his arm. Awkwardly she parried the stroke, and it beat the flat of her blade down on her head so that she saw sparks flash before her eyes, and staggered. Up went the sword again, with a low, beast-like cry of triumph—and then a giant form loomed behind the Xotalanc and steel flashed like a jet of blue lightning. The cry of the warrior broke short and he went down like an ox beneath the pole-ax, his brains gushing from his skull that had been split to the throat.

"Conan!" gasped Valeria. In a gust of passion she turned on the Xotalanc whose long hair she still gripped in her left hand. "Dog of hell!" Her blade swished as it cut the air in an upswinging arc with a blur in the middle, and the headless body slumped down, spurting blood. She hurled the severed head across the room.

"What the devil's going on here?" Conan bestrode the corpse of the man he had killed, broadsword in hand, glaring about him in amazement.

Techotl was rising from the twitching figure of the last Xotalanc, shaking red drops from his dagger. He was bleeding from the stab deep in the thigh. He stared at Conan with dilated eyes.

"What is all this?" Conan demanded again, not yet recovered from the stunning surprize of finding Valeria engaged in a savage battle with these fantastic figures in a city he had thought empty and uninhabited. Returning from an aimless exploration of the upper chambers to find Valeria missing from the room where he had left her, he had followed the sounds of strife that burst on his dumfounded ears.

"Five dead dogs!" exclaimed Techotl, his flaming eyes reflecting a ghastly exultation. "Five slain! Five crimson nails for the black pillar! The gods of blood be thanked!"

He lifted quivering hands on high, and then, with the face of a fiend, he spat on the corpses and stamped on their faces, dancing in his ghoulish glee. His recent allies eyed him in amazement, and Conan asked, in the Aquilonian tongue: "Who is this madman?"

Valeria shrugged her shoulders.

"He says his name's Techotl. From his babblings I gather that his people live at one end of this crazy city, and these others at the other end. Maybe we'd better go with him. He seems friendly, and it's easy to see that the other clan isn't."

TECHOTL had ceased his dancing and was listening again, his head tilted sidewise, dog-like, triumph struggling with fear in his repellent countenance.

"Come away, now!" he whispered. "We have done enough! Five dead dogs! My people will welcome you! They will honor you! But come! It is far to Tecuhltli. At any moment the Xotalancs may come on us in numbers too great even for your swords."

"Lead the way," grunted Conan.

Techotl instantly mounted a stair leading up to the gallery, beckoning them to follow him, which they did, moving rapidly to keep on his heels. Having reached the gallery, he plunged into a door that opened toward the west, and hurried through chamber after chamber, each lighted by skylights or green fire-jewels.

"What sort of a place can this be?" muttered Valeria under her breath.

"Crom knows!" answered Conan. "I've seen *his* kind before, though. They live on the shores of Lake Zuad, near the border of Kush. They're a sort of mongrel Stygians, mixed with another race that wandered into Stygia from the east some centuries ago and were absorbed by them.

They're called Tlazitlans. I'm willing to bet it wasn't they who built this city, though."

Techotl's fear did not seem to diminish as they drew away from the chamber where the dead men lay. He kept twisting his head on his shoulder to listen for sounds of pursuit, and stared with burning intensity into every doorway they passed.

Valeria shivered in spite of herself. She feared no man. But the weird floor beneath her feet, the uncanny jewels over her head, dividing the lurking shadows among them, the stealth and terror of their guide, impressed her with a nameless apprehension, a sensation of lurking, inhuman peril.

"They may be between us and Tecuhltli!" he whispered once. "We must beware lest they be lying in wait!"

"Why don't we get out of this infernal palace, and take to the streets?" demanded Valeria.

"There are no streets in Xuchotl," he answered. "No squares nor open courts. The whole city is built like one giant palace under one great roof. The nearest approach to a street is the Great Hall which traverses the city from the north gate to the south gate. The only doors opening into the outer world are the city gates, through which no living man has passed for fifty years."

"How long have you dwelt here?" asked Conan.

"I was born in the castle of Tecuhltli thirty-five years ago. I have never set foot outside the city. For the love of the gods, let us go silently! These halls may be full of lurking devils. Olmec shall tell you all when we reach Tecuhltli."

So in silence they glided on with the green fire-stones blinking overhead and the flaming floors smoldering under their feet, and it seemed to Valeria as if they fled through hell, guided by a dark-faced, lank-haired goblin.

Yet it was Conan who halted them as they were crossing an unusually wide chamber. His wilderness-bred ears were keener even than the ears of Techotl, whetted though these were by a lifetime of warfare in those silent corridors.

"You think some of your enemies may be ahead of us, lying in ambush?"

"They prowl through these rooms at all hours," answered Techotl, "as do we. The halls and chambers between Tecuhltli and Xotalanc are a disputed region, owned by no man. We call it the Halls of Silence. Why do you ask?"

"Because men are in the chambers ahead of us," answered Conan. "I heard steel clink against stone."

Again a shaking seized Techotl, and he clenched his teeth to keep them from chattering.

"Perhaps they are your friends," suggested Valeria.

"We dare not chance it," he panted, and moved with frenzied activity. He turned aside and glided through a doorway on the left which led into a chamber from which an ivory staircase wound down into darkness.

"This leads to an unlighted corridor below us!" he hissed, great beads of perspiration standing out on his brow. "They may be lurking there, too. It may all be a trick to draw us into it. But we must take the chance that they have laid their ambush in the rooms above. Come swiftly, now!"

SOFTLY as phantoms they descended the stair and came to the mouth of a corridor black as night. They crouched there for a moment, listening, and then melted into it. As they moved along, Valeria's flesh crawled between her shoulders in momentary expectation of a sword-thrust in the dark. But for Conan's iron

fingers gripping her arm she had no physical cognizance of her companions. Neither made as much noise as a cat would have made. The darkness was absolute. One hand, outstretched, touched a wall, and occasionally she felt a door under her fingers. The hallway seemed interminable.

Suddenly they were galvanized by a sound behind them. Valeria's flesh crawled anew, for she recognized it as the soft opening of a door. Men had come into the corridor behind them. Even with the thought she stumbled over something that felt like a human skull. It rolled across the floor with an appalling clatter.

"Run!" yelped Techotl, a note of hysteria in his voice, and was away down the corridor like a flying ghost.

Again Valeria felt Conan's hand bearing her up and sweeping her along as they raced after their guide. Conan could see in the dark no better than she, but he possessed a sort of instinct that made his course unerring. Without his support and guidance she would have fallen or stumbled against the wall. Down the corridor they sped, while the swift patter of flying feet drew closer and closer, and then suddenly Techotl panted: "Here is the stair! After me, quick! Oh, quick!"

His hand came out of the dark and caught Valeria's wrist as she stumbled blindly on the steps. She felt herself half dragged, half lifted up the winding stair, while Conan released her and turned on the steps, his ears and instincts telling him their foes were hard at their backs. *And the sounds were not all those of human feet.*

Something came writhing up the steps, something that slithered and rustled and brought a chill in the air with it. Conan lashed down with his great sword and felt the blade shear through something that might have been flesh and bone, and cut deep into the stair beneath. Something touched his foot that chilled like the touch of frost, and then the darkness beneath him was disturbed by a frightful thrashing and lashing, and a man cried out in agony.

The next moment Conan was racing up the winding staircase, and through a door that stood open at the head.

Valeria and Techotl were already through, and Techotl slammed the door and shot a bolt across it—the first Conan had seen since they left the outer gate.

Then he turned and ran across the well-lighted chamber into which they had come, and as they passed through the farther door, Conan glanced back and saw the door groaning and straining under heavy pressure violently applied from the other side.

Though Techotl did not abate either his speed or his caution, he seemed more confident now. He had the air of a man who has come into familiar territory, within call of friends.

But Conan renewed his terror by asking: "What was that thing that I fought on the stair?"

"The men of Xotalanc," answered Techotl, without looking back. "I told you the halls were full of them."

"This wasn't a man," grunted Conan. "It was something that crawled, and it was as cold as ice to the touch. I think I cut it asunder. It fell back on the men who were following us, and must have killed one of them in its death throes."

Techotl's head jerked back, his face ashy again. Convulsively he quickened his pace.

"It was the Crawler! A monster *they* have brought out of the catacombs to aid them! What it is, we do not know, but we have found our people hideously slain by it. In Set's name, hasten! If they put it on our trail, it will follow us to the very doors of Tecuhltli!"

"I doubt it," grunted Conan. "That was a shrewd cut I dealt it on the stair."

"Hasten! Hasten!" groaned Techotl.

They ran through a series of green-lit chambers, traversed a broad hall, and halted before a giant bronze door.

Techotl said: "This is Tecuhltli!"

3. *The People of the Feud*

TECHOTL smote on the bronze door with his clenched hand, and then turned sidewise, so that he could watch back along the hall.

"Men have been smitten down before this door, when they thought they were safe," he said.

"Why don't they open the door?" asked Conan.

"They are looking at us through the Eye," answered Techotl. "They are puzzled at the sight of you." He lifted his voice and called: "Open the door, Xecelan! It is I, Techotl, with friends from the great world beyond the forest!—They will open," he assured his allies.

"They'd better do it in a hurry, then," said Conan grimly. "I hear something crawling along the floor beyond the hall."

Techotl went ashy again and attacked the door with his fists, screaming: "Open, you fools, open! The Crawler is at our heels!"

Even as he beat and shouted, the great bronze door swung noiselessly back, revealing a heavy chain across the entrance, over which spearheads bristled and fierce countenances regarded them intently for an instant. Then the chain was dropped and Techotl grasped the arms of his friends in a nervous frenzy and fairly dragged them over the threshold. A glance over his shoulder just as the door was closing showed Conan the long dim vista of the hall, and dimly framed at the other end an ophidian shape that writhed slowly and painfully into view, flowing in a dull-hued length from a chamber door, its hideous blood-stained head wagging drunkenly. Then the closing door shut off the view.

Inside the square chamber into which they had come heavy bolts were drawn across the door, and the chain locked into place. The door was made to stand the battering of a siege. Four men stood on guard, of the same lank-haired, dark-skinned breed as Techotl, with spears in their hands and swords at their hips. In the wall near the door there was a complicated contrivance of mirrors which Conan guessed was the Eye Techotl had mentioned, so arranged that a narrow, crystal-paned slot in the wall could be looked through from within without being discernible from without. The four guardsmen stared at the strangers with wonder, but asked no question, nor did Techotl vouchsafe any information. He moved with easy confidence now, as if he had shed his cloak of indecision and fear the instant he crossed the threshold.

"Come!" he urged his new-found friends, but Conan glanced toward the door.

"What about those fellows who were following us? Won't they try to storm that door?"

Techotl shook his head.

"They know they cannot break down the Door of the Eagle. They will flee back to Xotalanc, with their crawling fiend. Come! I will take you to the rulers of Tecuhltli."

ONE of the four guards opened the door opposite the one by which they had entered, and they passed through into a hallway which, like most of the rooms on that level, was lighted by both the slot-like skylights and the clusters of winking fire-gems. But unlike the other rooms they had traversed, this hall showed evidences of occupation. Velvet tapestries

adorned the glossy jade walls, rich rugs were on the crimson floors, and the ivory seats, benches and divans were littered with satin cushions.

The hall ended in an ornate door, before which stood no guard. Without ceremony Techotl thrust the door open and ushered his friends into a broad chamber, where some thirty dark-skinned men and women lounging on satin-covered couches sprang up with exclamations of amazement.

The men, all except one, were of the same type as Techotl, and the women were equally dark and strange-eyed, though not unbeautiful in a weird dark way. They wore sandals, golden breastplates, and scanty silk skirts supported by gem-crusted girdles, and their black manes, cut square at their naked shoulders, were bound with silver circlets.

On a wide ivory seat on a jade dais sat a man and a woman who differed subtly from the others. He was a giant, with an enormous sweep of breast and the shoulders of a bull. Unlike the others, he was bearded, with a thick, blue-black beard which fell almost to his broad girdle. He wore a robe of purple silk which reflected changing sheens of color with his every movement, and one wide sleeve, drawn back to his elbow, revealed a forearm massive with corded muscles. The band which confined his blue-black locks was set with glittering jewels.

The woman beside him sprang to her feet with a startled exclamation as the strangers entered, and her eyes, passing over Conan, fixed themselves with burning intensity on Valeria. She was tall and lithe, by far the most beautiful woman in the room. She was clad more scantily even than the others; for instead of a skirt she wore merely a broad strip of gilt-worked purple cloth fastened to the middle of her girdle which fell below her knees. Another strip at the back of her girdle completed that part of her costume, which she wore with a cynical indifference. Her breast-plates and the circlet about her temples were adorned with gems. In her eyes alone of all the dark-skinned people there lurked no brooding gleam of madness. She spoke no word after her first exclamation; she stood tensely, her hands clenched, staring at Valeria.

The man on the ivory seat had not risen.

"Prince Olmec," spoke Techotl, bowing low, with arms outspread and the palms of his hands turned upward, "I bring allies from the world beyond the forest. In the Chamber of Tezcoti the Burning Skull slew Chicmec, my companion——"

"The Burning Skull!" It was a shuddering whisper of fear from the people of Tecuhltli.

"Aye! Then came I, and found Chicmec lying with his throat cut. Before I could flee, the Burning Skull came upon me, and when I looked upon it my blood became as ice and the marrow of my bones melted. I could neither fight nor run. I could only await the stroke. Then came this white-skinned woman and struck him down with her sword; and lo, it was only a dog of Xotalanc with white paint upon his skin and the living skull of an ancient wizard upon his head! Now that skull lies in many pieces, and the dog who wore it is a dead man!"

An indescribably fierce exultation edged the last sentence, and was echoed in the low, savage exclamations from the crowding listeners.

"But wait!" exclaimed Techotl. "There is more! While I talked with the woman, four Xotalancs came upon us! One I slew—there is the stab in my thigh to prove how desperate was the fight. Two the woman killed. But we were hard pressed when this man came into the fray

and split the skull of the fourth! Aye! Five crimson nails there are to be driven into the pillar of vengeance!"

He pointed at a black column of ebony which stood behind the dais. Hundreds of red dots scarred its polished surface—the bright scarlet heads of heavy copper nails driven into the black wood.

"Five red nails for five Xotalanca lives!" exulted Techotl, and the horrible exultation in the faces of the listeners made them inhuman.

"Who are these people?" asked Olmec, and his voice was like the low, deep rumble of a distant bull. None of the people of Xuchotl spoke loudly. It was as if they had absorbed into their souls the silence of the empty halls and deserted chambers.

"I am Conan, a Cimmerian," answered the barbarian briefly. "This woman is Valeria of the Red Brotherhood, an Aquilonian pirate. We are deserters from an army on the Darfar border, far to the north, and are trying to reach the coast."

The woman on the dais spoke loudly, her words tripping in her haste.

"You can never reach the coast! There is no escape from Xuchotl! You will spend the rest of your lives in this city!"

"What do you mean?" growled Conan, clapping his hand to his hilt and stepping about so as to face both the dais and the rest of the room. "Are you telling us we're prisoners?"

"She did not mean that," interposed Olmec. "We are your friends. We would not restrain you against your will. But I fear other circumstances will make it impossible for you to leave Xuchotl."

His eyes flickered to Valeria, and he lowered them quickly.

"This woman is Tascela," he said. "She is a princess of Tecuhltli. But let food and drink be brought our guests. Doubtless they are hungry, and weary from their long travels."

He indicated an ivory table, and after an exchange of glances, the adventurers seated themselves. The Cimmerian was suspicious. His fierce blue eyes roved about the chamber, and he kept his sword close to his hand. But an invitation to eat and drink never found him backward. His eyes kept wandering to Tascela, but the princess had eyes only for his white-skinned companion.

TECHOTL, who had bound a strip of silk about his wounded thigh, placed himself at the table to attend to the wants of his friends, seeming to consider it a privilege and honor to see after their needs. He inspected the food and drink the others brought in gold vessels and dishes, and tasted each before he placed it before his guests. While they ate, Olmec sat in silence on his ivory seat, watching them from under his broad black brows. Tascela sat beside him, chin cupped in her hands and her elbows resting on her knees. Her dark, enigmatic eyes, burning with a mysterious light, never left Valeria's supple figure. Behind her seat a sullen handsome girl waved an ostrich-plume fan with a slow rhythm.

The food was fruit of an exotic kind unfamiliar to the wanderers, but very palatable, and the drink was a light crimson wine that carried a heady tang.

"You have come from afar," said Olmec at last. "I have read the books of our fathers. Aquilonia lies beyond the lands of the Stygians and the Shemites, beyond Argos and Zingara; and Cimmeria lies beyond Aquilonia."

"We have each a roving foot," answered Conan carelessly.

"How you won through the forest is a wonder to me," quoth Olmec. "In bygone days a thousand fighting-men scarcely were able to carve a road through its perils."

"We encountered a bench-legged monstrosity about the size of a mastodon,"

said Conan casually, holding out his wine goblet which Techotl filled with evident pleasure. "But when we'd killed it we had no further trouble."

The wine vessel slipped from Techotl's hand to crash on the floor. His dusky skin went ashy. Olmec started to his feet, an image of stunned amazement, and a low gasp of awe or terror breathed up from the others. Some slipped to their knees as if their legs would not support them. Only Tascela seemed not to have heard. Conan glared about him bewilderedly.

"What's the matter? What are you gaping about?"

"You—you slew the dragon-god?"

"God? I killed a dragon. Why not? It was trying to gobble us up."

"But dragons are immortal!" exclaimed Olmec. "They slay each other, but no man ever killed a dragon! The thousand fighting-men of our ancestors who fought their way to Xuchotl could not prevail against them! Their swords broke like twigs against their scales!"

"If your ancestors had thought to dip their spears in the poisonous juice of Derketa's Apples," quoth Conan, with his mouth full, "and jab them in the eyes or mouth or somewhere like that, they'd have seen that dragons are not more immortal than any other chunk of beef. The carcass lies at the edge of the trees, just within the forest. If you don't believe me, go and look for yourself."

Olmec shook his head, not in disbelief but in wonder.

"It was because of the dragons that our ancestors took refuge in Xuchotl," said he. "They dared not pass through the plain and plunge into the forest beyond. Scores of them were seized and devoured by the monsters before they could reach the city."

"Then your ancestors didn't build Xuchotl?" asked Valeria.

"It was ancient when they first came into the land. How long it had stood here, not even its degenerate inhabitants knew."

"Your people came from Lake Zuad?" questioned Conan.

"Aye. More than half a century ago a tribe of the Tlazitlans rebelled against the Stygian king, and, being defeated in battle, fled southward. For many weeks they wandered over grasslands, desert and hills, and at last they came into the great forest, a thousand fighting-men with their women and children.

"It was in the forest that the dragons fell upon them, and tore many to pieces; so the people fled in a frenzy of fear before them, and at last came into the plain and saw the city of Xuchotl in the midst of it.

"They camped before the city, not daring to leave the plain, for the night was made hideous with the noise of the battling monsters throughout the forest. They made war incessantly upon one another. Yet they came not into the plain.

"The people of the city shut their gates and shot arrows at our people from the walls. The Tlazitlans were imprisoned on the plain, as if the ring of the forest had been a great wall; for to venture into the woods would have been madness.

"That night there came secretly to their camp a slave from the city, one of their own blood, who with a band of exploring soldiers had wandered into the forest long before, when he was a young man. The dragons had devoured all his companions, but he had been taken into the city to dwell in servitude. His name was Tolkemec." A flame lighted the dark eyes at mention of the name, and some of the people muttered obscenely and spat. "He promised to open the gates to the warriors. He asked only that all captives taken be delivered into his hands.

"At dawn he opened the gates. The warriors swarmed in and the halls of Xuchotl ran red. Only a few hundred folk dwelt there, decaying remnants of a once

great race. Tolkemec said they came from the east, long ago, from Old Kosala, when the ancestors of those who now dwell in Kosala came up from the south and drove forth the original inhabitants of the land. They wandered far westward and finally found this forest-girdled plain, inhabited then by a tribe of black people.

"These they enslaved and set to building a city. From the hills to the east they brought jade and marble and lapis lazuli, and gold, silver and copper. Herds of elephants provided them with ivory. When their city was completed, they slew all the black slaves. And their magicians made a terrible magic to guard the city; for by their necromantic arts they re-created the dragons which had once dwelt in this lost land, and whose monstrous bones they found in the forest. Those bones they clothed in flesh and life, and the living beasts walked the earth as they walked it when Time was young. But the wizards wove a spell that kept them in the forest and they came not into the plain.

"SO FOR many centuries the people of Xuchotl dwelt in their city, cultivating the fertile plain, until their wise men learned how to grow fruit within the city —fruit which is not planted in soil, but obtains its nourishment out of the air— and then they let the irrigation ditches run dry, and dwelt more and more in luxurious sloth, until decay seized them. They were a dying race when our ancestors broke through the forest and came into the plain. Their wizards had died, and the people had forgot their ancient necromancy. They could fight neither by sorcery nor the sword.

"Well, our fathers slew the people of Xuchotl, all except a hundred which were given living into the hands of Tolkemec, who had been their slave; and for many days and nights the halls re-echoed to their screams under the agony of his tortures.

"So the Tlazitlans dwelt here, for a while in peace, ruled by the brothers Tecuhltli and Xotalanc, and by Tolkemec. Tolkemec took a girl of the tribe to wife, and because he had opened the gates, and because he knew many of the arts of the Xuchotlans, he shared the rule of the tribe with the brothers who had led the rebellion and the flight.

"For a few years, then, they dwelt at peace within the city, doing little but eating, drinking and making love, and raising children. There was no necessity to till the plain, for Tolkemec taught them how to cultivate the air-devouring fruits. Besides, the slaying of the Xuchotlans broke the spell that held the dragons in the forest, and they came nightly and bellowed about the gates of the city. The plain ran red with the blood of their eternal warfare, and it was then that——" He bit his tongue in the midst of the sentence, then presently continued, but Valeria and Conan felt that he had checked an admission he had considered unwise.

"Five years they dwelt in peace. Then" —Olmec's eyes rested briefly on the silent woman at his side—"Xotalanc took a woman to wife, a woman whom both Tecuhltli and old Tolkemec desired. In his madness, Tecuhltli stole her from her husband. Aye, she went willingly enough. Tolkemec, to spite Xotalanc, aided Tecuhltli. Xotalanc demanded that she be given back to him, and the council of the tribe decided that the matter should be left to the woman. She chose to remain with Tecuhltli. In wrath Xotalanc sought to take her back by force, and the retainers of the brothers came to blows in the Great Hall.

"There was much bitterness. Blood was shed on both sides. The quarrel became a feud, the feud an open war. From the welter three factions emerged—Tecuhltli, Xotalanc, and Tolkemec. Already, in the days of peace, they had divided the

city between them. Tecuhltli dwelt in the western quarter of the city, Xotalanc in the eastern, and Tolkemec with his family by the southern gate.

"Anger and resentment and jealousy blossomed into bloodshed and rape and murder. Once the sword was drawn there was no turning back; for blood called for blood, and vengeance followed swift on the heels of atrocity. Tecuhltli fought with Xotalanc, and Tolkemec aided first one and then the other, betraying each faction as it fitted his purposes. Tecuhltli and his people withdrew into the quarter of the western gate, where we now sit. Xuchotl is built in the shape of an oval. Tecuhltli, which took its name from its prince, occupies the western end of the oval. The people blocked up all doors connecting the quarter with the rest of the city, except one on each floor, which could be defended easily. They went into the pits below the city and built a wall cutting off the western end of the catacombs, where lie the bodies of the ancient Xuchotlans, and of those Tlazitlans slain in the feud. They dwelt as in a besieged castle, making sorties and forays on their enemies.

"The people of Xotalanc likewise fortified the eastern quarter of the city, and Tolkemec did likewise with the quarter by the southern gate. The central part of the city was left bare and uninhabited. Those empty halls and chambers became a battleground, and a region of brooding terror.

"Tolkemec warred on both clans. He was a fiend in the form of a human, worse than Xotalanc. He knew many secrets of the city he never told the others. From the crypts of the catacombs he plundered the dead of their grisly secrets—secrets of ancient kings and wizards, long forgotten by the degenerate Xuchotlans our ancestors slew. But all his magic did not aid him the night we of Tecuhltli stormed his castle and butchered all his people. Tolkemec we tortured for many days."

His voice sank to a caressing slur, and a far-away look grew in his eyes, as if he looked back over the years to a scene which caused him intense pleasure.

"Aye, we kept the life in him until he screamed for death as for a bride. At last we took him living from the torture chamber and cast him into a dungeon for the rats to gnaw as he died. From that dungeon, somehow, he managed to escape, and dragged himself into the catacombs. There without doubt he died, for the only way out of the catacombs beneath Tecuhltli is through Tecuhltli, and he never emerged by that way. His bones were never found, and the superstitious among our people swear that his ghost haunts the crypts to this day, wailing among the bones of the dead. Twelve years ago we butchered the people of Tolkemec, but the feud raged on between Tecuhltli and Xotalanc, as it will rage until the last man, the last woman is dead.

"It was fifty years ago that Tecuhltli stole the wife of Xotalanc. Half a century the feud has endured. I was born in it. All in this chamber, except Tascela, were born in it. We expect to die in it.

"We are a dying race, even as those Xuchotlans our ancestors slew. When the feud began there were hundreds in each faction. Now we of Tecuhltli number only these you see before you, and the men who guard the four doors: forty in all. How many Xotalancas there are we do not know, but I doubt if they are much more numerous than we. For fifteen years no children have been born to us, and we have seen none among the Xotalancas.

"We are dying, but before we die we will slay as many of the men of Xotalanc as the gods permit."

And with his weird eyes blazing, Olmec spoke long of that grisly feud, fought out in silent chambers and dim halls un-

der the blaze of the green fire-jewels, on floors smoldering with the flames of hell and splashed with deeper crimson from severed veins. In that long butchery a whole generation had perished. Xotalanc was dead, long ago, slain in a grim battle on an ivory stair. Tecuhltli was dead, flayed alive by the maddened Xotalancas who had captured him.

Without emotion Olmec told of hideous battles fought in black corridors, of ambushes on twisting stairs, and red butcheries. With a redder, more abysmal gleam in his deep dark eyes he told of men and women flayed alive, mutilated and dismembered, of captives howling under tortures so ghastly that even the barbarous Cimmerian grunted. No wonder Techotl had trembled with the terror of capture. Yet he had gone forth to slay if he could, driven by hate that was stronger than his fear. Olmec spoke further, of dark and mysterious matters, of black magic and wizardry conjured out of the black night of the catacombs, of weird creatures invoked out of darkness for horrible allies. In these things the Xotalancas had the advantage, for it was in the eastern catacombs where lay the bones of the greatest wizards of the ancient Xuchotlans, with their immemorial secrets.

VALERIA listened with morbid fascination. The feud had become a terrible elemental power driving the people of Xuchotl inexorably on to doom and extinction. It filled their whole lives. They were born in it, and they expected to die in it. They never left their barricaded castle except to steal forth into the Halls of Silence that lay between the opposing fortresses, to slay and be slain. Sometimes the raiders returned with frantic captives, or with grim tokens of victory in fight. Sometimes they did not return at all, or returned only as severed limbs cast down before the bolted bronze doors. It was a ghastly, unreal nightmare existence these people lived, shut off from the rest of the world, caught together like rabid rats in the same trap, butchering one another through the years, crouching and creeping through the sunless corridors to maim and torture and murder.

While Olmec talked, Valeria felt the blazing eyes of Tascela fixed upon her. The princess seemed not to hear what Olmec was saying. Her expression, as he narrated victories or defeats, did not mirror the wild rage or fiendish exultation that alternated on the faces of the other Tecuhltli. The feud that was an obsession to her clansmen seemed meaningless to her. Valeria found her indifferent callousness more repugnant than Olmec's naked ferocity.

"And we can never leave the city," said Olmec. "For fifty years no one has left it except those——" Again he checked himself.

"Even without the peril of the dragons," he continued, "we who were born and raised in the city would not dare leave it. We have never set foot outside the walls. We are not accustomed to the open sky and the naked sun. No; we were born in Xuchotl, and in Xuchotl we shall die."

"Well," said Conan, "with your leave we'll take our chances with the dragons. This feud is none of our business. If you'll show us to the west gate we'll be on our way."

Tascela's hands clenched, and she started to speak, but Olmec interrupted her: "It is nearly nightfall. If you wander forth into the plain by night, you will certainly fall prey to the dragons."

"We crossed it last night, and slept in the open without seeing any," returned Conan.

Tascela smiled mirthlessly. "You dare not leave Xuchotl!"

Conan glared at her with instinctive an-

tagonism; she was not looking at him, but at the woman opposite him.

"I think they dare," restorted Olmec. "But look you, Conan and Valeria, the gods must have sent you to us, to cast victory into the laps of the Tecuhltli! You are professional fighters—why not fight for us? We have wealth in abundance—precious jewels are as common in Xuchotl as cobblestones are in the cities of the world. Some the Xuchotlans brought with them from Kosala. Some, like the firestones, they found in the hills to the east. Aid us to wipe out the Xotalancas, and we will give you all the jewels you can carry."

"And will you help us destroy the dragons?" asked Valeria. "With bows and poisoned arrows thirty men could slay all the dragons in the forest."

"Aye!" replied Olmec promptly. "We have forgotten the use of the bow, in years of hand-to-hand fighting, but we can learn again."

"What do you say?" Valeria inquired of Conan.

"We're both penniless vagabonds," he grinned hardily. "I'd as soon kill Xotalancas as anybody."

"Then you agree?" exclaimed Olmec, while Techotl fairly hugged himself with delight.

"Aye. And now suppose you show us chambers where we can sleep, so we can be fresh tomorrow for the beginning of the slaying."

Olmec nodded, and waved a hand, and Techotl and a woman led the adventurers into a corridor which led through a door off to the left of the jade dais. A glance back showed Valeria Olmec sitting on his throne, chin on knotted fist, staring after them. His eyes burned with a weird flame. Tascela leaned back in her seat, whispering to the sullen-faced maid, Yasala, who leaned over her shoulder, her ear to the princess' moving lips.

The hallway was not so broad as most they had traversed, but it was long. Presently the woman halted, opened a door, and drew aside for Valeria to enter.

"Wait a minute," growled Conan. "Where do I sleep?"

Techotl pointed to a chamber across the hallway, but one door farther down. Conan hesitated, and seemed inclined to raise an objection, but Valeria smiled spitefully at him and shut the door in his face. He muttered something uncomplimentary about women in general, and strode off down the corridor after Techotl.

In the ornate chamber where he was to sleep, he glanced up at the slot-like skylights. Some were wide enough to admit the body of a slender man, supposing the glass were broken.

"Why don't the Xotalancas come over the roofs and shatter those skylights?" he asked.

"They cannot be broken," answered Techotl. "Besides, the roofs would be hard to clamber over. They are mostly spires and domes and steep ridges."

He volunteered more information about the "castle" of Tecuhltli. Like the rest of the city it contained four stories, or tiers of chambers, with towers jutting up from the roof. Each tier was named; indeed, the people of Xuchotl had a name for each chamber, hall and stair in the city, as people of more normal cities designate streets and quarters. In Tecuhltli the floors were named The Eagle's Tier, The Ape's Tier, The Tiger's Tier and The Serpent's Tier, in the order as enumerated, The Eagle's Tier being the highest, or fourth, floor.

"Who is Tascela?" asked Conan. "Olmec's wife?"

Techotl shuddered and glanced furtively about him before answering.

"No. She is—Tascela! She was the wife of Xotalanc—the woman Tecuhltli stole, to start the feud."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Conan. "That woman is beautiful and young. Are you trying to tell me that she was a wife fifty years ago?"

"Aye! I swear it! She was a full-grown woman when the Tlazitlans journeyed from Lake Zuad. It was because the king of Stygia desired her for a concubine that Xotalanc and his brother rebelled and fled into the wilderness. She is a witch, who possesses the secret of perpetual youth."

"What's that?" asked Conan.

Techotl shuddered again.

"Ask me not! I dare not speak. It is too grisly, even for Xuchotl!"

And touching his finger to his lips, he glided from the chamber.

4. *Scent of Black Lotus*

VALERIA unbuckled her sword-belt and laid it with the sheathed weapon on the couch where she meant to sleep. She noted that the doors were supplied with bolts, and asked where they led.

"Those lead into adjoining chambers," answered the woman, indicating the doors on right and left. "That one"—pointing to a copper-bound door opposite that which opened into the corridor—"leads to a corridor which runs to a stair that descends into the catacombs. Do not fear; naught can harm you here."

"Who spoke of fear?" snapped Valeria. "I just like to know what sort of harbor I'm dropping anchor in. No, I don't want you to sleep at the foot of my couch. I'm not accustomed to being waited on—not by women, anyway. You have my leave to go."

Alone in the room, the pirate shot the bolts on all the doors, kicked off her boots and stretched luxuriously out on the couch. She imagined Conan similarly situated across the corridor, but her feminine vanity prompted her to visualize him as scowling and muttering with chagrin as he cast himself on his solitary couch, and she grinned with gleeful malice as she prepared herself for slumber.

Outside, night had fallen. In the halls of Xuchotl the green fire-jewels blazed like the eyes of prehistoric cats. Somewhere among the dark towers a night wind moaned like a restless spirit. Through the dim passages stealthy figures began stealing, like disembodied shadows.

Valeria awoke suddenly on her couch. In the dusky emerald glow of the fire-gems she saw a shadowy figure bending over her. For a bemused instant the apparition seemed part of the dream she had been dreaming. She had seemed to lie on the couch in the chamber as she was actually lying, while over her pulsed and throbbed a gigantic black blossom so enormous that it hid the ceiling. Its exotic perfume pervaded her being, inducing a delicious, sensuous languor that was something more and less than sleep. She was sinking into scented billows of insensible bliss, when something touched her face. So supersensitive were her drugged senses, that the light touch was like a dislocating impact, jolting her rudely into full wakefulness. Then it was that she saw, not a gargantuan blossom, but a dark-skinned woman standing above her.

With the realization came anger and instant action. The woman turned lithely, but before she could run Valeria was on her feet and had caught her arm. She fought like a wildcat for an instant, and then subsided as she felt herself crushed by the superior strength of her captor. The pirate wrenched the woman around to face her, caught her chin with her free hand and forced her captive to meet her gaze. It was the sullen Yasala, Tascela's maid.

"What the devil were you doing bending over me? What's that in your hand?"

The woman made no reply, but sought

to cast away the object. Valeria twisted her arm around in front of her, and the thing fell to the floor—a great black exotic blossom on a jade-green stem, large as a woman's head, to be sure, but tiny beside the exaggerated vision she had seen.

"The black lotus!" said Valeria between her teeth. "The blossom whose scent brings deep sleep. You were trying to drug me! If you hadn't accidentally touched my face with the petals, you'd have—why did you do it? What's your game?"

Yasala maintained a sulky silence, and with an oath Valeria whirled her around, forced her to her knees and twisted her arm up behind her back.

"Tell me, or I'll tear your arm out of its socket!"

Yasala squirmed in anguish as her arm was forced excruciatingly up between her shoulder-blades, but a violent shaking of her head was the only answer she made.

"Slut!" Valeria cast her from her to sprawl on the floor. The pirate glared at the prostrate figure with blazing eyes. Fear and the memory of Tascela's burning eyes stirred in her, rousing all her tigerish instincts of self-preservation. These people were decadent; any sort of perversity might be expected to be encountered among them. But Valeria sensed here something that moved behind the scenes, some secret terror fouler than common degeneracy. Fear and revulsion of this weird city swept her. These people were neither sane nor normal; she began to doubt if they were even human. Madness smoldered in the eyes of them all—all except the cruel, cryptic eyes of Tascela, which held secrets and mysteries more abysmal than madness.

She lifted her head and listened intently. The halls of Xuchotl were as silent as if it were in reality a dead city. The green jewels bathed the chamber in a nightmare glow, in which the eyes of the woman on the floor glittered eerily up at her. A thrill of panic throbbed through Valeria, driving the last vestige of mercy from her fierce soul.

"Why did you try to drug me?" she muttered, grasping the woman's black hair, and forcing her head back to glare into her sullen, long-lashed eyes. "Did Tascela send you?"

No answer. Valeria cursed venomously and slapped the woman first on one cheek and then the other. The blows resounded through the room, but Yasala made no outcry.

"Why don't you scream?" demanded Valeria savagely. "Do you fear someone will hear you? Whom do you fear? Tascela? Olmec? Conan?"

YASALA made no reply. She crouched, watching her captor with eyes baleful as those of a basilisk. Stubborn silence always fans anger. Valeria turned and tore a handful of cords from a nearby hanging.

"You sulky slut!" she said between her teeth. "I'm going to strip you stark naked and tie you across that couch and whip you until you tell me what you were doing here, and who sent you!"

Yasala made no verbal protest, nor did she offer any resistance, as Valeria carried out the first part of her threat with a fury that her captive's obstinacy only sharpened. Then for a space there was no sound in the chamber except the whistle and crackle of hard-woven silken cords on naked flesh. Yasala could not move her fast-bound hands or feet. Her body writhed and quivered under the chastisement, her head swayed from side to side in rhythm with the blows. Her teeth were sunk into her lower lip and a trickle of blood began as the punishment continued. But she did not cry out.

The pliant cords made no great sound as they encountered the quivering body of the captive; only a sharp crackling snap, but each cord left a red streak across Yasala's dark flesh. Valeria inflicted the punishment with all the strength of her war-hardened arm, with all the mercilessness acquired during a life where pain and torment were daily happenings, and with all the cynical ingenuity which only a woman displays toward a woman. Yasala suffered more, physically and mentally, than she would have suffered under a lash wielded by a man, however strong.

It was the application of this feminine cynicism which at last tamed Yasala.

A low whimper escaped from her lips, and Valeria paused, arm lifted, and raked back a damp yellow lock. "Well, are you going to talk?" she demanded. "I can keep this up all night, if necessary!"

"Mercy!" whispered the woman. "I will tell."

Valeria cut the cords from her wrists and ankles, and pulled her to her feet. Yasala sank down on the couch, half reclining on one bare hip, supporting herself on her arm, and writhing at the contact of her smarting flesh with the couch. She was trembling in every limb.

"Wine!" she begged, dry-lipped, indicating with a quivering hand a gold vessel on an ivory table. "Let me drink. I am weak with pain. Then I will tell you all."

Valeria picked up the vessel, and Yasala rose unsteadily to receive it. She took it, raised it toward her lips—then dashed the contents full into the Aquilonian's face. Valeria reeled backward, shaking and clawing the stinging liquid out of her eyes. Through a smarting mist she saw Yasala dart across the room, fling back a bolt, throw open the copper-bound door and run down the hall. The pirate was after her instantly, sword out and murder in her heart.

But Yasala had the start, and she ran with the nervous agility of a woman who has just been whipped to the point of hysterical frenzy. She rounded a corner in the corridor, yards ahead of Valeria, and when the pirate turned it, she saw only an empty hall, and at the other end a door that gaped blackly. A damp moldy scent reeked up from it, and Valeria shivered. That must be the door that led to the catacombs. Yasala had taken refuge among the dead.

Valeria advanced to the door and looked down a flight of stone steps that vanished quickly into utter blackness. Evidently it was a shaft that led straight to the pits below the city, without opening upon any of the lower floors. She shivered slightly at the thought of the thousands of corpses lying in their stone crypts down there, wrapped in their moldering cloths. She had no intention of groping her way down those stone steps. Yasala doubtless knew every turn and twist of the subterranean tunnels.

She was turning back, baffled and furious, when a sobbing cry welled up from the blackness. It seemed to come from a great depth, but human words were faintly distinguishable, and the voice was that of a woman. "Oh, help! Help, in Set's name! Ahhh!" It trailed away, and Valeria thought she caught the echo of a ghostly tittering.

Valeria felt her skin crawl. What had happened to Yasala down there in the thick blackness? There was no doubt that it had been she who had cried out. But what peril could have befallen her? Was a Xotalanca lurking down there? Olmec had assured them that the catacombs below Tecuhltli were walled off from the rest, too securely for their enemies to break through. Besides, that tittering had not sounded like a human being at all.

Valeria hurried back down the corridor, not stopping to close the door that opened on the stair. Regaining her chamber, she closed the door and shot the bolt behind her. She pulled on her boots and buckled her sword-belt about her. She was determined to make her way to Conan's room and urge him, if he still lived, to join her in an attempt to fight their way out of that city of devils.

But even as she reached the door that opened into the corridor, a long-drawn scream of agony rang through the halls, followed by the stamp of running feet and the loud clangor of swords.

You will not want to miss the thrilling chapters that bring this weird story to a close in next month's WEIRD TALES. Reserve your copy at your magazine dealer's now.

Swamp Demons

By C. A. BUTZ

The lights that wink across the sodden moor
Like phosphorescent eyes that beckon men
To risk fell footsteps in the treacherous fen,
And sink in loathsome muck, without a spoor—
What ghosts of former days, what dread allure,
Abides within this subterranean den?
Or, reaching out, snares victims to its ken,
With wraith-like fingers, to a peril sure?

'Tis told that evil things lurk out of sight
With human bones that fester in the ooze;
Belike 'tis true, these bones that once were clothed
In fleshly form now harbor deadly spite
Against the living, and this swamp still brews
Within its bubbling depths the curse men loathed
Before they turned to leprous Things of Night!

Death Holds the Post

By AUGUST W. DERLETH and MARK SCHORER

A strange tale of living dead men and an unearthly horror that struck at dead soldiers in an African fort and brought them back to a gruesome resurrection

URGENT GOVERNMENT OF FRANCE ACTING ON ADVICE FROM GERMANY ASKS ALL COMMANDERS OF ALGERIAN POSTS TO WATCH FOR AND ARREST GERMAN SCIENTIST DR OTTO PRETTWEG WHO ESCAPED FROM SANITARIUM WITH IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS STOP BELIEVED HEADING FOR ALGERIA SINCE ALL OTHER AVENUES OF ESCAPE STOPPED SEEN ON FRENCH COAST STOP ARREST THIS MAN IMMEDIATELY STOP DESCRIBED AS TALL THIN MAN SUNKEN CHEEKS LIVID SCAR ON LEFT CHEEK BLACK EYES GRAY HAIR URGENT RELAY

EDDIE CRANSTON reread the dispatch he had just decoded and handed it to his companion in the stuffy room. "They *would* spring that on us just when we're in a hole about Mechar," he said in irritation.

His companion read the message, grunted perfunctorily, and handed it back without comment. Cranston went out into the deserted quadrangle where buildings and ground alike baked in the mid-afternoon sun. He was unpleasantly aware of the heavy, hot lifelessness of the place. On the wall two guards were limned against the parched blue of the African sky; in the shade of a barracks doorway a native slept; there was no other sign of life. Half a hundred men had marched from Surdez to the post at Mechar two days before. The other half were finding relief from the heat in sleep.

Cranston went into the largest of the several buildings within the white walls of Surdez. Lieutenant Prageur, a big man with a troubled frown on his forehead, slept on his narrow untidy cot, snoring lightly, his boots on the floor, his blouse and shirt flung over the back of a chair. Cranston touched his superior's shoulder.

"Lieutenant," he said softly.

The officer awoke with a start, swinging his bare feet to the floor. "What d'you want? Anything happen?"

"Special dispatch, sir."

Prageur took the message and read it. He shrugged irritably. "We won't have to worry much about that. Even a lunatic wouldn't hide in a god-forsaken hole like this. Now, what about Mechar? Still no contact?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Damned queer business. Those fellows should have been there a long while ago."

"Any orders, sir?"

"Stick at the wire. We can't do anything else."

Cranston left the building, thinking about Mechar. The trouble had started when news came from Mechar that a queer band of unidentified men—marauders, gipsies, Tuaregs, no one knew exactly—were occupying an old and deserted post near Mechar, the last outpost. Before Lieutenant D'Oblier at Mechar could send out an investigating party, the post had been surprized by a formidable army of men and, after a futile battle on the part of the Legionnaires, had been taken. Dispatches to Surdez had ceased in the

"His voice was slow and gentle, almost crooning."

middle of the sentence announcing Mechar's fall.

Orders had come from headquarters to dispatch fifty men to Mechar at once, and at the same time came the news that more men were being sent to Surdez from adjoining posts. Two days had passed since then, but no word had reached Surdez from Mechar, nor had any intelligence of the fifty men reached the post. Lieutenant Prageur and the remainder of the garrison had come to believe that D'Oblier had been deceived as to the number of men at the deserted post, for only a great number could have destroyed the garrison at Mechar, which, being the last outpost, had many more men than Surdez.

Cranston waited futilely at the telegraph, occasionally tapping out the code call for Mechar. Silence was his only answer. He slid down in his chair and dozed.

HALF an hour later Cranston was shaken out of his sleep by the rough voice of a guard.

"Gasparri's come back," he said.

Cranston was instantly awake. Gasparri was one of the fifty dispatched to

Mechar two days ago. "Gasparri!" he echoed. "Who else?"

"He's alone. Stumbling across the desert as if he were wounded. I saw him from a distance. He dropped from exhaustion just beyond the gates."

Gasparri lay at the door, stretched on the ground where the guard had put him. Cranston bent over the body. Gasparri's face was black with grime and sweat, his lips were cracked, and white with caked dust. His chest lifted and fell in heavy, disturbed breathing.

"Get him to bed. No, wait—I'll get him in. You go for Lieutenant Prageur."

Cranston carried the unconscious man into the building, where he lowered him carefully to a cot. He sought and found some brandy, which he forced through Gasparri's parched lips. In a few moments the exhausted man's breathing eased up. Cranston was waching Gasparri's face when Prageur entered.

The lieutenant went over to the cot and looked down. He said nothing, but apprehension for the forty-nine men who had not returned was plainly written on his features. The Italian moved restlessly; he was coming around. Cranston and Prageur waited. Presently Gasparri opened his eyes. Immediately Cranston was at his side with a glass of water.

"Not too much, now," he said.

Gasparri gulped a few swallows with painful effort and sank back on the cot. His blood-shot eyes stared vacantly at the ceiling. His lips moved soundlessly. But in a moment blood flushed in his cheeks, crept back into his gray lips.

"Gasparri!" said Lieutenant Prageur.

Gasparri looked vacantly at him and said, "Not to Mechar!" That was all.

Prageur bent forward. "Where are the others, Gasparri?"

For a long moment Gasparri's face remained expressionless; then a look of unutterable horror crept over his features. His blood-shot eyes opened wide, his lips fell apart, his hands fumbled at his neck as if he were stifling. *"Dio!"* he gasped; "one of them—one had me by the neck!" Then he began to mutter incoherently.

Prageur held back his impatience.

It did not take Gasparri long to pull himself together. After his muttering subsided, he lay for almost a half-hour fully conscious, and at length pulled himself up into a sitting position and began to talk.

He told of the arrival of the fifty at Mechar. They had come to the post in eleven hours, for it was not a great distance from Surdez, and had found it apparently deserted. Yet the gates were locked on the inside. . . .

"We broke in after a while and waited for something to happen. Nothing did. Inside, everything was quiet and deserted. Then we went in. As soon as we were well inside, the firing began, from all sides, from doors and windows and roofs where *they* had been concealed. We answered their fire—but we didn't have a chance against an army like that!"

Gasparri shuddered, horror in his eyes.

"That army," he repeated. *"Dio!* it was no army. We shot, we struck home—but not one of them fell." His voice rose abruptly. "They were dead already! Some of them were skeletons, half-rotten corpses, and—*Dio!*—some were the men from Mechar—dead men, fighting!"

He fell back.

Prageur made a gesture of annoyance. "Sun's got him," he said irritably. "And he sounded all right."

He bent over the Italian, who was crouching back against the bed, covering his eyes with his hands, shuddering violently. "Look here, Gasparri!" he commanded sharply. "Forget that. We sent fifty good men to Mechar. They haven't

come back, and we haven't had a word from them! What happened to them? You must know. *Tell me!"*

Gasparri raised his head, dropping his hands listlessly. Then he said, "I have told you, sir. They're dead. They were killed by those dead things at Mechar. I alone escaped." His voice was heavy and portentous with a calm, deadly hopelessness.

"You're delirious!" snapped Prageur. He sat down on the cot and grasped Gasparri's wrists roughly in a tight grip.

Gasparri made no protest; he only looked at the lieutenant out of fright-haunted eyes.

"Tell me!" Prageur ordered again, but his voice was less sure.

Gasparri repeated, "I have told you, sir. They were killed by dead men, and one who was not dead—a tall, thin old man, who directed their movements from the safety of the watch-tower, and he was like a ghost. But all the others are dead, I tell you, dead—and yet they moved, those dead ones."

"What happened to our men, Gasparri?"

"They're dead in Mechar." Then abruptly Gasparri's eyes flamed with a ghastly fear. *"Or perhaps they, too, are alive like those others."*

PRAGEUR turned away, shrugging. Cranston followed him to the door. "He's obviously mad, sir, but that doesn't explain his presence. Why is he here? He came alone on foot across the sand."

Lieutenant Prageur looked at him. *"Sang de Dieu!"* he exploded. "You don't put any faith in that tale, do you, Cranston?"

"No, sir," replied Cranston promptly. "But I don't understand his condition. He got a shock somewhere, because there's something more than imagination behind that story he's telling."

The whimpering voice of the Italian drifted out to them. "My neck," Gasparri complained, "bones around my neck—rotted flesh—ahhrr. . . ."

Prageur jerked his head in the direction of the cot. "Look after him, and keep on trying to get Mechar," he said. Then he turned on his heel and walked out into the blazing quadrangle.

Cranston saluted smartly and went back into the building.

Gasparri's removal to his own quarters was but a matter of a few moments, and Cranston was soon attempting to contact Mechar, though he felt intuitively that this was hopeless. He had not been long at it when he was brought to his feet by a startled shout from the quadrangle. He ran quickly to the door, where he was assailed by a babble of voices and sight of a second guard running toward the lieutenant's quarters.

Someone saw Cranston and shouted, "Another coming across the sand wearing the uniform. From Mechar."

"How far out?"

"About a mile."

Lieutenant Prageur, who had heard, was already striding toward the walls. Cranston followed.

From the small turret surmounting the southwest corner of the walls, Prageur scanned the desert through his binoculars. Cranston, looking out, saw for a few moments nothing but a gleaming expanse of sand topped by undulating silver waves of heat, rising and falling into an endless sky, blue as the sea. Then his eyes focussed properly and he saw the oncoming man—a small figure, moving slowly but steadily across the golden expanse of sand.

"I don't recognize him," said the lieu-

tenant doubtfully. "Can't make out his face for his *képi*. But he's one of our men. Take a look."

As Cranston took the glasses, Prageur stepped out along the wall and shouted down. "Ourlet, ride out to meet him."

The glasses brought the man on the sand much closer. It was a white man in a private's uniform. But what instantly caught Cranston's eye was the ease with which the soldier was moving. He was coming in a straight line across the sands, heading obviously for the Surdez gates, never hesitating, never stumbling as a man in exhaustion might, just coming along at a steady though slow and mechanically awkward gait.

"Spot that walk?" asked Lieutenant Prageur.

Cranston nodded. "Funny, sir."

Prageur stood looking out across the sand, his hands moving nervously. "I don't like it," he said suddenly. "But he seems to be one of our men."

THE two of them descended the stairs to the quadrangle. The gates had been thrown open, and Ourlet had ridden out to meet the oncoming Legionnaire. Cranston had the fleeting hope that from this one, at least, they might learn something.

Then abruptly a shot broke the tense stillness. It came from beyond the post, from the sand, from the weapon which had appeared in one hand of the advancing Legionnaire. And the shot had been fired at Ourlet!

It had happened in the space of a few seconds—the walking man suddenly producing a revolver and firing at Ourlet as Ourlet rode up, Ourlet hit, dropping on his horse, wheeling the animal about and riding furiously back toward the gates. Amid a babble of shouting from the men at the gates, a second shot rang out; a moment later Ourlet was safely within the walls.

Someone sprang forward to help him from the horse, while others moved to shut the gates.

"Wait!" ordered Prageur.

He was watching the oncoming figure, and there was a curious intentness in his gaze. But before he could give a further order, the abrupt silence that had fallen was again broken—this time from behind them.

Gasparri, aroused by the outcries and the shots, had come from his quarters and had crept unseen to the gates. Suddenly he began to scream, his horrified eyes fixed upon the figure looming out of the sand waste.

"It's one of those dead ones! *Dio!* We are lost if he gets in!"

At the same moment, Ourlet gasped, "Something queer—he's not one of us." Then he collapsed.

Prageur had stepped forward and was even now bending above Gasparri.

But Gasparri went on, his voice rising. "Lieutenant, sir, it is a dead man. He'll kill all of us, just as he was killed. We can't kill him—he's dead already! *Dio!* Close the gates before it is too late!"

Terror spoke mutely from the sick man's trembling lips, from his haunted eyes. The man from Mechar was less than a hundred feet from the gate now, but he had not once looked up to see what lay ahead of him. There was menace in the way he held on to his weapon.

"Hide, all of you," Prageur ordered. "Leave the gates wide. Some of you crouch close to the wall. Some get on top and fall on him when he comes in. We'll take him alive!"

The men scrambled to obey, and in a few moments silence had fallen, all the men concealed, Cranston and Prageur close to the gate in order to be among the first to attack. The sand sounded under

footsteps, and then the man from Mechar came through the opened gate.

Three Legionnaires who had been lying atop the wall launched themselves downward, one of them striking the intruder and carrying him to the sand with him. At the same moment men rushed at the man from Mechar from behind the gates and along the walls. The weapon he carried sounded only once; then it was wrenched from his grasp and he lay prone, unmoving, his *képi* tipped off from his head.

It was over.

Then a long sob of horror rose from the men around the fallen Legionnaire, and there was a concerted backward movement. Cranston and Prageur pressed forward and saw. The face that had been hidden beneath the *képi* was not a face. It was half exposed bone, half greenly rotting flesh! From it rose the odor of decaying flesh. The thing on the sand before them had been shot through the head a long time ago.

"Mon Dieu!" breathed Prageur, staring with wide eyes, and abruptly turned away. "Tie it up and put it away somewhere—oh, bury it!"

Reluctantly, four of the men moved to obey.

Prageur looked uncertainly at Cranston. "Come along," he murmured.

He moved to where Gasparri was leaning weakly against the wall, shuddering at the memory this foul invasion had brought to fresh life.

"Come, Gasparri," said Prageur gently, taking him by the arm and leading the way to his quarters.

"All right," said Prageur without preliminary, "I'll grant you that story, Gasparri. Don't ask me what I think about it—I've got nothing to say. I want to ask you something."

He took a fragment of paper from his desk. Cranston recognized it as the paper upon which he had written the message from headquarters earlier in the day.

Prageur handed it to Gasparri. "Anything in that sound familiar to you?" he asked.

GASPARRI took the paper wonderingly and read. Abruptly his expression changed. *"Dio,* yes!" he whispered harshly. "Tall thin man—sunken cheeks—livid scar on left cheek—gray hair," he read jerkingly, and looked up. "It's the man—the man who directs those dead ones!"

A mirthless smile appeared on Prageur's lips. "Get that, Cranston. Wire headquarters at once for detailed information on Prettweg and his documents."

Headquarters was vague. Their best was in a short wire that came two hours later:

PRETTWEG DANGEROUS LUNATIC WHO BELIEVES IN CERTAIN FORMULÆ CONCERNING REANIMATION OF DEAD BODIES STOP ESCAPED SANITARIUM AND MADE FOR COAST BELIEVED IN ALGERIA SINCE HE HAD TALKED OF GOING TO COUNTRY WHERE CONFLICT WAS IN PROGRESS STOP GERMAN GOVERNMENT RELUCTANT TO RELAY MORE STOP SURETE BELIEVES PRETTWEG IS ON TO SOMETHING DEVELOPED IN GERMAN LABORATORIES HAS ADDED DEVELOPMENTS FROM OWN DISEASED BRAIN STOP TAKE THIS MAN DEAD OR ALIVE.

The message gave scant satisfaction to Lieutenant Prageur. He studied it for a few moments in silence; then he dropped the paper with a mutter of impatience.

"Look here," he said, "reinforcements are due here almost any hour now, but we'll not wait. Forty of us march on Mechar tonight."

"Lieutenant, sir!" protested Gasparri. "Those men go to something worse than death!"

"Leave that to me, Gasparri," snapped

Prageur. "I'll lead them, and I'll lead most of them back here alive unless something goes seriously wrong. I don't think it will. Meanwhile, you keep a tight mouth about what you've told us; the men know that something's hitched up against them, and they're on edge. —You, Cranston, let Ellery take the telegraph; I've got a special use for you. Before you get ready, wire headquarters for three planes. We'll bomb Mechar, if necessary."

"But, sir, why sacrifice your men?" asked Gasparri.

"There will be little sacrifice," said Prageur. "We'll fake an attack. As long as I'm not entirely convinced of what's going on at Mechar, I'm not taking chances either way. We'll lead them to attack us, and then retreat. One of us will have to get into the post, will have to fake death—and that may mean death, I don't know. But that's our only way of finding out what's going on in there, and we'll lose the least men that way."

Gasparri nodded.

"I've picked you for that, Cranston," said Prageur suddenly.

For a moment Cranston felt a sick feeling invade him. Then he dispelled it. "Very well, sir," he said.

"You know what it means?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right. You're the man. Granting Gasparri's story, your danger is twofold—the directing genius, Prettweg, may discover that you're not really dead and may have you killed; and you may be trapped in the post when the bombing begins—if it becomes necessary to bomb.—All right, get ready. Send that wire for planes; I'll let the men know. Lehmann will be in charge until I come back—if I do."

The red globe of the sun was rising over the rim of the desert when the small troop of forty men sighted Mechar. A slight wind was blowing. Cranston and Prageur walked together at the side of the marching line.

"In case you don't come back?" asked the lieutenant soberly.

"Instructions for the disposal of what I own are in my quarters," replied Cranston curtly.

Prageur nodded. He took a small bottle from his pocket and gave it to Cranston. "Blood drawn just before we left," he said. "Spill it over your uniform and slit the cloth to resemble a bullet-hole. Take no more chance than you have to."

The lieutenant slowed up his men. Through his glasses he isolated a single figure high on the ramparts of Mechar, keeping carefully out of range.

"Prettweg, all right," he murmured, dropping his glasses. "I can make out the scar. Queer-looking devil."

Prageur ordered the men to break file, briefly repeated his earlier orders, spread them out, and ordered an advance. Cranston was well in the lead.

They were perhaps a hundred feet from the walls of Mechar when Prageur ordered them to fire. Prettweg had disappeared, and other figures had taken his place, carelessly exposing themselves to the fire of the Surdez men.

Immediately a volley of lead poured down on Lieutenant Prageur's men. And a second. But that was all, for at once the lieutenant ordered a retreat—indeed, some of the men had taken flight at the first volley, in accordance with Prageur's previous instructions. Cranston fell at the first volley, thinking fleetingly what supreme irony it would have been had he been shot and killed. Five other men fell with him. It was but the work of a few moments to uncork the bottle of blood

and let it soak into his uniform, which he had slit previously. Then he pushed the bottle deep into the sand.

From the corner of his eye he saw Prageur looking back; then he and the men were gone, and Cranston lay unmoving. He wondered what would happen now, warning himself not to move a muscle, to breathe shallowly. It seemed to him presently that hours were passing, but in a little while his ears caught the sound of activity behind the walls of the near-by post. The sun's heat had become terrific, and his hope that something would happen was intensified. Then he heard the gates of Mechar swing open.

From a carefully opened eye he saw a figure come forth alone, a revolver held menacingly in his hand. It was Doctor Prettweg. The old man was hatless, and his long white hair lent his face an air of benevolence, but nothing concealed the aura of diabolic evil about him—the crimson scar edged in blue and gray, the twisted mouth, the fierce, black eyes, loathsome and gloating. As Cranston watched, the doctor smiled at sight of the dead men, his pleasure ghoulishly manifest. He turned and made irritable motions to someone beyond the gates.

The first corpse lay at a distance of twenty feet from Cranston. Against his better judgment, he continued to watch the mad doctor's approach. He saw him bend over the corpse, looking only casually at the body. Then Prettweg took a bottle from his pocket, opened it, and forced liquid into the dead man's mouth; he stood then, watching the corpse intently for a few moments, moving away only when he had seen—as Cranston, too, saw—*a faint, horrible movement from the dead man!*

CRANSTON restrained himself with a tremendous effort; he had seen something he knew to be impossible, yet it *was!* Prettweg came on to the second corpse, and Cranston, following him with his eyes, saw that the second Legionnaire was not dead, for he moved feebly at the doctor's approach. Could it be that the first of them had not been dead either?

But what doubts Cranston had were horribly, brutally dispelled; for the doctor, noticing the movement, hesitated, assured himself that the man was in no position to inflict injury, and then callously put a bullet through the Legionnaire's head. Cranston steeled himself to keep from giving voice to his fury and horror.

The bottle again, and once more liquid down a dead throat.

Inside him, Cranston was shuddering with loathing for this inhuman beast. But no emotion rose to the surface. He lay now with his lips fallen apart, his jaw hanging loosely agape, and despite the terrific strain, with his eyes wide and turned up against the sun. He was completely relaxed and motionless, his breathing restrained as much as possible.

Footsteps came toward him. He was aware suddenly of the doctor's hand grasping his neck, of long, clammy fingers touching his skin, and the strain of simulating death became almost unbearable. Then the bottle was at his mouth, and acrid liquid touching his tongue, and Prettweg's grip relaxed. Cranston's head fell against the sand, his one thought that his most difficult first stage was over, for the doctor had noticed nothing amiss. Cranston let the vile-tasting liquid in his mouth drool out upon the sand.

Prettweg was standing among the dead, his now malign face contemplating the nearest corpse, his hands clasped behind him much in the attitude of a physician in consultation. But his attitude underwent a subtle change—an un-

holy joy came into the old man's eyes, his mouth upcurved in evil triumph, and it seemed that psychic power flowed from his entire body. He extended his arms in an all-embracing gesture, and his hands beckoned. Now his eyes became hypnotic, his aspect momentarily benign, and in an almost suggestively benign voice, he spoke.

"Come now, my children. Rise and follow me."

If he had not been too concerned about his own safety, Cranston might have given himself away in his terror at what followed Prettweg's gentle words. For the dead began to move, stiffly, mechanically! One by one they rose and stood at attention, their dead faces turned expressionlessly toward the commanding figure whose medicine and mental magic had brought their bodies to ghastly life. Their arms hung limply at their sides, their heads were servilely bent, their eyes sought blankly for the directing force in the tall thin figure before them. Prettweg's gray hair, now ringed around by sunlight, lent him an ironical saintliness.

Cranston was the last to rise.

The doctor swept the six with his glance and looked back toward the fort.

Cranston felt deep within him the wish that the bombing planes might already be here. Let them come! he thought, but there was no sound in the air.

"Come," said Prettweg.

He strode away toward the open gates, and the incredibly animated dead moved after him, Cranston among them; he too, like those others, walking with the automatic precision of somnambulists. He suffered a momentary impulse to shoot the doctor as he walked along with his back to him, but a confused sense of honor, combined with the conviction that he must get inside Mechar as Prageur had ordered, to verify Gasparri's ghastly story, smothered his insane desire. His hands itched for the feel of his weapon, his entire body craved the maddening, satisfying pleasure of shooting down this inhuman monster who had such terrible power over the dead.

But surely there was already enough verification? Or was it nightmare? Cranston was walking at the side of a Surdez Legionnaire, Franz Klast, a German whom he remembered as a good fellow. Cranston had seen him shot, had seen him fall—for an instant he fancied that he labored under a monstrous delusion, a mad dream from which he must shake himself; for Klast could not be dead, since he walked at his side, alive!

"Klast!" he whispered. "For God's sake, talk to me!"

There was no answer.

CRANSTON turned his head recklessly to the side and looked at Klast, almost recoiling in horror at what he saw: the gaping hole in Klast's temple, torn by the fatal bullet fired by one of the dead from the walls of Mechar. The wound's black maw mocked Cranston.

Klast was walking sightlessly, animated by a ghastly force from beyond his body! A flash of intelligence gave sudden vision to Cranston—this madman Prettweg, controlling thousands upon thousands of dead, could ultimately sweep over the face of the earth, for his soldiers had conquered death, and were in themselves death. Death could sweep over the earth, could hold every fort, every outpost, every great city, could reign over all the country, directed by the cancerous brain of this madman! Far back, perhaps, some remote German scientist had manufactured this acrid elixir of life, but it took modern experimentation and the distorted mind of a madman to complete the frightful dreams of that earlier madman.

Cranston knew that every moment was vital. Prettweg must die, no matter what the cost.

Cranston looked guardedly ahead. Prettweg was just vanishing between the gates of Mechar. There was nothing to do but enter the post, and presently the shambling file of men passed through the gateway. Cranston heard the gates creaking shut behind him.

Prettweg must die! The thought drummed through his head. For without the doctor, the elixir was harmless—it needed the directing genius of this mad brain to complete the animation barely begun by the invention of a man now long forgotten. The font of this psychic power must be wiped out.

Now he stood, trapped within the walls of Mechar, he and a madman alone with a ghastly army of dead men. His companions had ceased to walk; they had stopped in their tracks, bodies wearily sagging. Cranston wondered whether Prettweg had removed that mysterious directing force. For a moment he allowed his lids to shut out the death around him, and strained his ears for the sound of motors humming in the sky.

There was nothing.

He looked cautiously around him. The quadrangle was cluttered with half-decayed bodies of living dead men, some of them skeletal remains of Tuaregs whose bodies had long lain exposed to the sun! They stood dumbly against the walls, they sat in doorways or on the sweltering sand, their arms dangling between their legs, they leaned on the ramparts, watching the sky through eyes destined soon to sink in decay into their sockets. And Cranston stood among them, isolated and alone.

PRETTWEG came suddenly from one of the doorways. He stood before them suddenly, and again Cranston was struck with the false saintliness lent him by the sun in his hair. The mad eyes were glowing again as from some inner vision, and presently the old man's lips parted and he began to speak, his voice slow and gentle, almost crooning, and yet alive with gloating power.

"Tomorrow, my children, we will take Surdez," he said. "There will be enough of us after that to move down the line upon post after post. This will be our country then. And afterward! I dream of what lies before us!"

The madness of him spoke from all his features. Once again Cranston conquered the desire to fire pointblank at the sinister face that seemed to hang in the arid heat of the quadrangle. For a moment Prettweg scanned their dead faces, and now his gaze lingered on Cranston. Could he suspect? Cranston wondered; or had he somehow seen Cranston's reckless movements of a few moments ago? But perhaps—more believably—he had in some way felt the mental force of another living mind! The thought froze Cranston with sudden fear; for surely this perceptive mind must have felt hate flowing toward him!

But Prettweg turned and began to walk away.

Instantly Cranston's fear broke into disorder. He whipped his revolver from its holster. But at the same instant, his dead comrades, galvanized into action by an unuttered command, flung themselves upon him. His revolver cracked, and a spurt of sand fanned into the air to show Cranston how far his bullet had gone from its mark. The Mechar and Surdez dead were upon him, grappling with him, struggling clumsily for his weapon, and others were pouring toward him from all sides. He felt their rotting arms wrapped about his limbs, felt their decaying fingers and the hardness of fleshless bones at his neck.

Revolvers cracked. He felt searing pains in his leg and shoulder, and went down under a mass of nauseating dead things. Still he fought. He had a momentary glimpse of Prettweg looking sardonically on, his mad face now afire with insane hatred, and saw that the doctor had a revolver ready to fire at Cranston's first appearance. With a pain-racking effort, he shifted under the struggling mass of dead, aimed wildly, and fired—once, twice, three times.

Abruptly the struggle ebbed away.

And died.

Cranston lay in the midst of a ghastly mound of dead flesh. He felt nausea assailing him, buried his face in his hands, and waited for death. Nothing happened. A moment passed and he looked up, pulling himself from the decaying flesh that pinned him down. He saw bodies fall from the ramparts like stones, saw the living dead in doorways sag and sprawl into the sand, saw the standing dead topple and collapse like empty sacks. And then he saw Doctor Prettweg against the wall of a near-by building sag gently and slide downward to the sand.

He writhed on the ground, shuddered, and died. Like a giant bird he lay, his white coat spread beneath his arms like the too feeble wings of some predatory creature, his long hair fanned away from his head, his arms outspread, his fingers twisted into the hot sand.

CRANSTON came unsteadily to his feet, his brain awhirl, the wounds in his leg and shoulder flaming with pain. It was over. The horror of living dead men had passed with Prettweg's death. Pray God it would never come again!

Abruptly he heard a familiar sound—the steady drone of racing planes. His mind struggled to free itself from the horror of his surroundings. He must escape before the planes got there—but he alone could not open the gates in so short a time.

Then his mind cleared.

He began to run wildly toward the central building. Somewhere there must be the Foreign Legion flag. A glance told him it was no longer on the ramparts, the dead invaders having doubtless removed it. If he could find the flag or, failing to find it, if he could get to the roof and signal them—for they must know he was here. He could be certain they had first stopped at Surdez for instructions from Prageur.

He emerged on the roof to see the planes almost directly above, circling uncertainly about. At the same moment he caught sight of the flag, crumpled carelessly into a corner. He ran and gathered it up in his arms, mounted the highest wall, and there let the flag stream out behind him as he ran along the perilous rampart.

The leading plane banked and another dipped toward him. He had a sickening conviction that machine-gun fire would sweep him from the wall, but the plane veered away. They had seen and understood. Cranston jumped to the roof again and saw men from Surdez coming across the dunes beyond the gate. For a moment only he stood there; then he felt again the increasing pain of his wounds and he toppled forward, lost in an unfathomable sea of blackness.

CRANSTON was back at his telegraph next day when Lieutenant Prageur entered, in his hand a report to be dispatched to headquarters. As he left the room he turned.

"By the way, you may depend upon promotion," he said crisply, smiling. Then he was gone.

With grim lips Cranston tapped out the report to headquarters:

THE GARRISON AT MECHAR WAS WIPED OUT BY A SURPRIZE ATTACK OF TUAREGS STOP HELD FORT AND WIPED OUT FIFTY-FOUR OF OUR MEN STOP SURPRIZE ATTACK BY REMAINDER OF OUR MEN YESTERDAY TOOK MECHAR STOP TUAREGS FLED STOP DR OTTO PRETTWEG ABOUT WHOM WIRE RECEIVED TWO DAYS AGO WAS KILLED IN ACTION AT MECHAR STOP HAD JOINED AND WAS LEADING TUAREG ATTACK STOP RELAY TO GERMAN AUTHORITIES.

That was all. It did not need Lieutenant Prageur's subsequent words to convince Cranston of the fitness of the message. "You remember how I took Gasparri's story at first. Can you imagine how they'd take it at headquarters, Cranston?"

The Diary of Philip Westerly

By PAUL COMPTON

A strange, brief tale of the terrible fear inspired by a man's horrendous reflection in a mirror

IT HAS been ten years since my uncle, Philip Westerly, disappeared. Many theories have been advanced as to why and how he vanished so strangely and so completely. Many have wondered why a man should vanish and leave nothing behind him but a smashed mirror. But none of these theories or wild imaginings are half so fantastic as the story I gathered from the diary which some whim prompted him to keep.

But first a word about Philip Westerly. He was a wealthy man, and also a cruel, selfish man. His wealth was attributed to this same cruelty and selfishness. He also had many whims. One of them was keeping a diary. Another was his love for mirrors. He was handsome in a cruel sort of way and almost effeminate in his liking to stand before them and admire himself. This eccentricity was borne out by the fact that covering one whole side of his room was a mirror of gigantic size—the same mirror that is linked with his disappearance. But read the excerpts from the diary of Philip Westerly.

AUG. 3RD. *Afternoon:* Billings asked for an extension on that note today, but I saw no reason why I should grant him any such thing. When I told him

this, he began cursing me in a frightful manner. He said I was cruel and that some day I would be called to account for the way I treated people. I laughed outright at this, but at the same time I felt a vague sense of uneasiness which even yet I have not dispelled.

Night: A remarkable thing has happened. I had gone to my room to dress for dinner and I was standing before the mirror tying my tie. I had begun the usual procedure that one follows, when I noticed that no such action was recorded in the mirror. True, there was my reflection in the glass, but it followed none of the movements that I made. It was immobile!

I extended my hand to touch the reflection and encountered nothing but the polished surface of the mirror. Then I noticed a truly remarkable thing. The reflection in the mirror wore no tie! I stepped back aghast. Was this an illusion? Had my mind and vision been affected by some malady that I was not aware of? Impossible! Then I regarded the reflection with a more careful scrutiny. There were a number of differences between it and myself. For one thing it wore a stubby growth of beard on its face. I was positive that I had visited the barber that very day and passed my hand across my chin to verify this. It encountered nothing but smooth skin. The lips of the man in the mirror drooped in a display of gnarled, yellow fangs, while my own bared nothing but two rows of gleaming, well-cared-for teeth.

I was filled simultaneously with a feeling of disgust and fear, and looked for further discrepancies. I found them. The feet and hands were abnormally large, and the clothing of the thing was old, baggy, and covered with filth.

I dared not stay longer. I tied the tie as best I could and descended hurriedly to dinner.

Aug. 4th. *Morning:* I awoke feeling jaded and tired. My friend in the mirror is still with me. Ordinarily the reflection of myself, in bed, is caught in the mirror, but not so this morning. Instead, I saw that the dweller within had, like myself, been having a night's rest. I hope he slept better than I did, for my own night was a series of fitful, restless tossings.

"Good morning," I said, rising.

When I moved, he moved. As I advanced toward the mirror he drew closer to me. I stopped and surveyed him. He resembled me only remotely—I hope. I smiled, and he responded with a wolfish twist of his mouth. I extended my hand as if I wanted to shake hands with him, but he drew back as if from fire. I can't understand the terror which he holds for me. I try not to show my fear in front of him, but I feel that, animal-like, he senses it. I refer to the reflection as "he," "him," or "it," for I cannot bring myself to admit that the thing in the mirror is my reflection. But I scarcely dare write what I do believe it to be. I have always been skeptical about such things as "soul," but when I look into the mirror —God help me!

Night: I am spending much time in my room now. I've spent most of the day here. This thing is beginning to hold a morbid fascination for me. I can't stay away for any length of time. I wish I could. My wife is beginning to worry about me. She says I look pale. She tells me I need a rest—a long rest. If I could only confide in her! In anyone! But I can't. I must fight and wait this out alone.

Aug. 5th. There has been little or no change in our relationship. He still remains aloof.

Today my wife came to my room to see how I was feeling. She stood in such

a position that looking into the mirror was unavoidable. She stood before the mirror arranging her hair. She noticed nothing out of the ordinary, but he was still there. Damn him! He was still there, and this time he snarled in triumph at me.

One other remarkable thing. My wife hadn't seen the thing there in the mirror, but neither had I seen her reflection. It was the same with Peter, my valet, and Anna, the maid. Anna would have dusted the mirror had I not stopped her. I must take no chances. A close scrutiny might reveal him to them, and they must not know—they must not know!

AUG. 6TH. Three days. Three days of hell! That's what it has been since I discovered that damned thing. How he tortures me! He has begun to mock me. When he thinks he has given an extraordinarily clever impersonation he shakes with laughter. I can't hear him laugh. But I see him. And that's worse. I can't stand it much longer!

Aug. 7th. We never know how much we can stand until we go through some ordeal such as I am now undergoing. But I feel that my nerve is near the breaking-point.

I have locked the door of my room. Anna leaves a tray outside my door. Sometimes I eat the food she brings, but more often I don't. My wife begs me to let her in, but I tell her to go away. I'm afraid to tell her—I'm afraid to tell anyone. I know what they do with people who have "hallucinations". No, I can't tell. Neither can I leave. God knows why, but I can't.

Aug. 8th. It was day before yesterday that I mentioned his mocking me. Today—I tremble at the thought—he is beginning to resemble me! This morning I looked in the mirror and discovered that he had discarded his rags and was now dressed in one of my suits. I ran to the wardrobe and discovered his clothes hanging where mine had been. I turned and faced him. He laughed and pointed toward my hands and feet. They were bloated beyond recognition. I dare not guess how far this change has gone. I can write no more today.

Aug. 9th. The change is complete. He looks more like me than I do myself. He has grown more cruel with the change. He taunts me with my ugliness. Finally I could stand it no longer. I fled from the room. At last I found the thing I was looking for—a mirror. When I came face to face with what I now am I nearly collapsed. Yes, he has taken my form. God pity me! I've taken his!

I slunk back to the room in horror. Back to his laughter and the hell that is now my existence. God knows what tomorrow will bring!

Aug. 10th. Seven days since that devil has been in the mirror. I have prayed to God that it may be the last. It will! I know it will! He, in the mirror, senses it too. I see the look of apprehension in his eyes. Damn him! It's my turn to snarl in triumph now. For when I lay down this pen, for the last time, perhaps, I shall leap through the mirror. And he exists only in the mirror. God help me! *I am laying down my pen!*

In the Dark

By RONAL KAYSER

It was a tale of sheer horror that old Asa Gregg poured into the dictaphone

THE watchman's flashlight printed a white circle on the frosted-glass, black-lettered door:

GREGG CHEMICAL CO., MFRS.
ASA GREGG, PRES.
PRIVATE

The watchman's hand closed on the knob, rattled the door in its frame. Queer, but tonight the sound had seemed to come from in there. . . . But that couldn't be. He knew that Mr. Gregg and Miss Carruthers carried the only keys to the office, so any intruder would have been forced to smash the lock.

Maybe the sound came from the storage room. The watchman clumped along the rubber-matted corridor, flung his weight against that door. It opened hard, being of ponderous metal fitted into a cork casing. The room was an air-tight, fire-proof vault, really. His shoes gritted on the concrete floor as he prowled among the big porcelain vats. The flashlight bored through bluish haze to the concrete walls. Acid fumes escaping under the vat lids made the haze and seared the man's throat.

He hurried out, coughing and wiping his eyes. It was damn funny. Every night lately he heard the same peculiar noise somewhere in this wing of the building. . . . Like a body groaning and turning in restless sleep, it was. It scared him. He didn't mention the mystery to anyone, though. He was an old man, and he didn't want Mr. Gregg to think he was getting too old for the job.

"Asa 'd think I was crazy, if I told him about it," he mumbled.

INSIDE the office, Asa Gregg heard the muttered words plainly. He sat very still in the big, leather-cushioned chair, hardly breathing until the scrape of the watchman's feet had thinned away down the hall. There was no light in the room to betray him; only the cherry-colored tip of his cigar, which couldn't be visible through the frosted glass door. Anyway, it'd be an hour before the watchman's round brought him past the office again. Asa Gregg had that hour, if he could screw up his nerve to use it. . . .

He took the frayed end of the cigar from his mouth. His hand, which had wasted to mere skin and bone these past few months, groped through the darkness, slid over the polished coolness of the dictaphone hood, and snapped the switch. Machinery faintly whirred. His fingers found the tube, lifted it.

"Miss Carruthers!" he snapped. Then he hesitated. Surely, he could trust Mary Carruthers! He'd never wondered about her before. She'd been his secretary for a dozen years—lately, since he couldn't look after affairs himself as he used to, she had practically run the business. She was forty, sensible, unbeautiful, and tight-lipped. Hell, he had to trust her!

His voice plunged into the darkness.

"What I have to say now is intended for Mrs. Gregg's ears only. She will take the first boat home, of course. Meet that boat and bring her to the office. Since my wife knows nothing about a dictaphone, it will be necessary for you to set this record running. As soon as you have done so, leave her alone in the room. Make

sure she's not interrupted for a half-hour. That's all."

He waited a decent interval. The invisible needle peeled its thread into the revolving wax cylinder.

"Jeannette," muttered Asa Gregg, and hesitated again. This wasn't going to be easy to say. He decided to begin matter-of-factly. "As you probably know, my will and the insurance policies are in the vault at the First National. I believe you will find all of my papers in excellent order. If any questions arise, consult Miss Carruthers. What I have to say to you now is purely personal—I feel, my dear, that I owe you an explanation—that is——"

God, it came harder than he had expected.

"Jeannette," he started in afresh, "you remember three years ago when I was in the hospital. You were in Palm Beach at the time, and I wired that there'd been an accident here at the plant. That wasn't strictly so. The fact is, I'd gotten mixed up with a girl——"

He paused, shivering. In the darkness a picture of Dot swam before him. The oval face, framed by gleaming swirls of lemon-tinted hair, had pouting scarlet lips, and eyes whose allure was intensified by violet make-up. The full-length picture of her included a streamlined, full-blossomed and yet delectably lithe body. A costly, enticing, Broadway-chorus orchid! As a matter of fact, that was where he'd found her.

"I won't make any excuses for myself," Asa Gregg said harshly. "I might point out that you were always in Florida or Bermuda or France, and that I was a lonely man. But it wasn't just loneliness, and I didn't seek companionship. I thought I was making a last bow to Romance. I was successful, sixty, and silly, and I did all the damn fool things—I even wrote letters to her. Popsy-wopsy letters." The dictaphone couldn't record the grimace that jerked his lips. "She saved them, of course, and by and by she put a price on them—ten thousand dollars. Dot claimed that one of those filthy tabloids had offered her that much for them—and what was a poor working-girl to do? She lied. I knew that.

"I told her to bring the letters to the office after business hours, and I'd take care of her. I took care of her, all right. I shot her, Jeannette!"

He mopped his face with a handkerchief that was already damp.

"Not on account of the money, you understand. It was the things she said, after she had tucked the bills into her purse . . . vile things, about the way she had earned it ten times over by enduring my beastly kisses. I'd really loved that girl, and I'd thought she'd cared for me a little. It was her hate that maddened me, and I got the gun out of my desk drawer——"

ASA GREGG reached through the darkness for the switch. He fumbled for the bottle which stood on the desk. His hand trembled, spilling some of the liquor onto his lap. He drank from the bottle. . . .

This part of the story he'd skip. It was too horrible, even to think about it. He didn't want to remember how the blood pooled inside Dot's fur coat, and how he'd managed to carry the body out of the office without leaking any of her blood onto the floor. He tried to forget the musky sweetness of the perfume on the dead girl, mingled with that other evil blood-smell. Especially he didn't want to remember the frightful time he'd had stripping the gold rings from her fingers, and the one gold tooth in her head. . . .

The horror of it coiled in the blackness about him. His own teeth rattled against

the bottle when he gulped the second drink. He snapped the switch savagely, but when he spoke his voice cringed into the tube:

"I carried her into the storage room. I got the lid off one of the acid tanks. The vat contained an acid powerful enough to destroy anything—except gold. In fact, the vat itself had to be lined with gold-leaf. I knew that in twenty-four hours there wouldn't be a recognizable body left, and in a week there wouldn't be anything at all. No matter what the police suspected, they couldn't prove a murder charge without a *corpus delicti.* I had committed the perfect crime—except for one thing. I didn't realize that there'd be a *splash* when she went into the vat."

Gregg laughed, not pleasantly. His wife might think it'd been a sob, when she heard this record. "Now you understand why I went to the hospital," he jerked. "Possibly you'd call that poetic justice. Oh, God!"

His voice broke. Again he thumbed off the switch, and mopped his face with the damp linen.

The rest—how could he explain the rest of it?

He spent a long minute arranging his thoughts.

"You haven't any idea," he resumed, "no one has any idea, of how I've been punished for the thing I did. I don't mean the sheer physical agony—but the fear that I'd talk coming out of the ether at the hospital. The fear that she'd been traced to my office—I'd simply hidden her rings away, expecting to drop them into the river—or that she might have confided in her lover . . . yes, she had one. Or, suppose a whopping big order came through and that tank was emptied the very next day. And I couldn't ask any questions—I didn't even know what was in the papers.

"However, that part of it gradually cleared up. I quizzed Miss Carruthers, and learned that an unidentified female body had been fished out of the East River a few days after Dot disappeared. That's how the police 'solved' the case. I got rid of her rings. I ordered that vat left alone.

"The other thing began about six months ago."

A spasm contorted his face. His fingers ached their grip into the dictaphone tube.

"Jeannette, you remember when I began to object to the radio, how I'd shout at you to turn it off in the middle of a program? You thought I was ill, and worried about business. . . . You were wrong. The thing that got me was *hearing her voice*——"

He gripped the cold cigar, chewed it. "It's very strange that you didn't notice it. No matter what station we dialed to, always that same voice came stealing into the room! But perhaps you did notice? You said, once or twice, that all those blues singers sounded alike!

"And she was a blues singer. . . . It was she, all right, somewhere out in the ether, reminding me. . . .

"The next thing was—well, at first when I noticed it in the office I thought Miss Carruthers had suddenly taken up with young ideas. You see, I kept smelling perfume."

And he smelled it now. It was like a miasma in the dark.

"It isn't anything that Carruthers wears," he grated. "It comes from—yes, the storage room. I realized that about a month ago. Just after you sailed—one night I stayed late at the office, and I went in there. . . . It seemed to be strongest around the vat—*her* vat—and I lifted the lid.

"The sweet, sticky musk-smell hit me like a blow in the face.

"And that isn't all!"

TERROR stalked in this room. Asa Gregg crouched in his chair, felt the weight of Fear on him like a submarine pressure. His cigar pitched to his knees, dropped to the floor.

"You won't believe this, Jeannette." He hammered the words like nails into the darkness in front of him. "You will say that it's impossible. I know that. It *is* impossible. It is a physiological absurdity —it contradicts the laws of natural science.

"But I saw something on the bottom of that vat!"

He groped for the bottle. His wife would hear a long gurgle, and then a coughing gasp. . . .

"The vat was nearly full of this transparent, oily acid," he went on. "What I saw was a lot of sediment on the golden floor. And there shouldn't have been any sediment! The stuff utterly dissolves animal tissue, bone, even the common ores—keeps them in suspension.

"It didn't look like sediment, either. I looked like a heap of mold . . . gravemold!

"I replaced the lid. I spent a week convincing myself that it was all impossible, that I *couldn't* have seen anything of the sort. Then I went to the vat again——"

Silence hung in the darkness while he sucked wind into his lungs. And the words burst—separate, yammering shrieks:

"I looked, night after night! For hours at a time I've watched the change. . . . Did you ever see a body decompose? Of course not! Neither have I. But you must know in a general way what the process is. Well, this has been the exact opposite!

"First, I stared at the heap of gravemold as it shaped itself into *bones*, a skeleton.

"I watched the coming of hair, a yellow tangle of it sprouting from the bare round skull, until—oh, God!—the flesh began making itself before my eyes! I couldn't bear any more. I stayed away—didn't come to the office for five days."

The tube slipped from his sweating, slick fingers. Panting, Asa Gregg fumbled in the dark until he found it.

Exhaustion, not self-control, flattened his voice to a deadly monotone. "I tried to think of a way out. If I could fish the corpse out of the tank! But I couldn't smuggle it out of the plant—alone. You know that, and so do I. Besides, what would be the use? If acid can't kill her, nothing can.

"That's why I can't have the lid cemented on. It wouldn't do any good, either! Until three days ago, she hadn't the least color, looked as white as a ghost in the vat. A naked ghost, because there's been no resurrection for her clothing. . . .

"I've watched her limbs grow rosy! Her lips are scarlet! Her eyes are bright—they opened yesterday—and her breasts were rising and falling—oh, almost imperceptibly—but that was last night.

"And tonight—I swear it—her lips moved! She muttered my name! She turned—she'd been lying on her side—over onto her back!"

The record would be badly blurred. His hand shook violently, bobbled the tube against his lips. Gregg braced his elbow against the desk.

"She isn't dead," he choked. "She's only asleep . . . not very soundly asleep. . . . She's waking up!"

The invisible needle quivered as it traced several noises. There was his tortured breathing, and the clawing of his fingernails rattling over the desk. The drawer clicked as it opened.

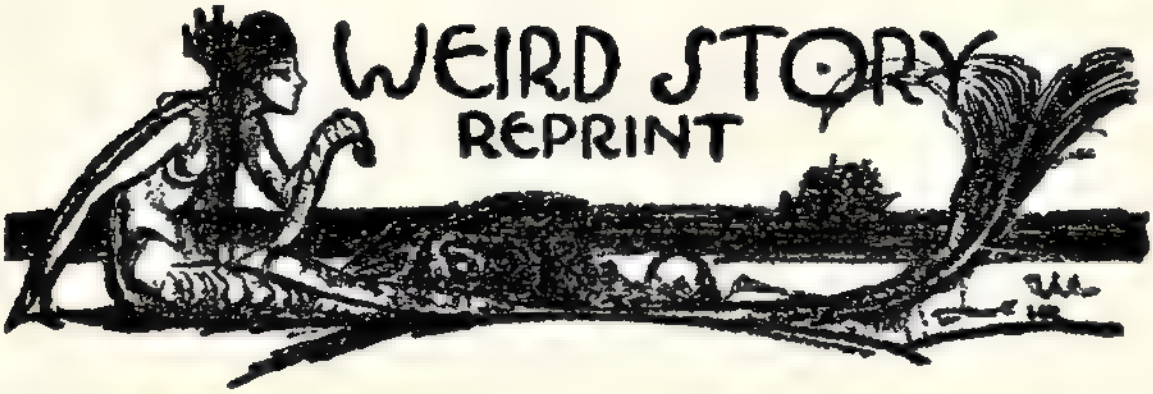
The loud click was the cocking of the revolver.

"Soon she's going to get out of that vat!" Gregg bleated. "Jeannette, forgive me—God, forgive me—but I will not—I cannot—I dare not stay here to see her then!"

THE sound of the shot brought the watchman stumbling along the corridor. He crashed against the office door. It banged open in a shower of falling frosted glass. The watchman's flashlight severed the darkness, and printed its white circle on the face of Asa Gregg.

He had fallen back into the chair, a blackish gout of blood running from the hole in his temple. He stared sightlessly into the light with his eyes that were two gnarls of shrunken brown flesh, like knots in a pine board.

Asa Gregg was blind . . . had been, since that night three years past when the acid splashed. . . .



Four Wooden Stakes*

By VICTOR ROWAN

THERE it lay on the desk in front of me, that missive so simple in wording, yet so perplexing, so urgent in tone:

Jack:

Come at once for old-time's sake. Am all alone. Will explain upon arrival.

REMSON.

Having spent the past three weeks in bringing to a successful termination a case that had puzzled the police and two of the best detective agencies in the city, I decided I was entitled to a rest; so I ordered two grips packed and went in search of a time-table. It was several years since I had seen Remson Holroyd; in fact, I had not seen him since we had matriculated from college together. I was curious to know how he was getting along, to say nothing of the little diversion he promised me in the way of a mystery.

The following afternoon found me standing on the station platform of the little town of Charing, a village of about fifteen hundred souls. Remson's place

* From WEIRD TALES for February, 1926.

was about ten miles from there; so I stepped forward to the driver of a shay and asked if he would kindly take me to the Holroyd estate. He clasped his hands in what seemed to be a silent prayer, shuddered slightly, then looked at me with an air of wonder, mingled with suspicion.

"I dun't know what ye wants to go out there fer, stranger, but if ye'll take the advice of a God-fearin' man ye'll turn back where ye come from. There be some mighty fearful tales concernin' that place floatin' around, and more'n one tramp's been found near there so weak from loss of blood and fear he could hardly crawl. They's somethin' there. Be it man or beast I dun't know, but as fer me, I wouldn't drive ye out there for a hundred dollars—cash."

This was not at all encouraging, but I was not to be influenced by the talk of a superstitious old gossip; so I cast about for a less impressionable rustic who would undertake the trip to earn the ample reward I promised at the end of the ride. To my chagrin, they all acted like the first; some crossed themselves fervently, while others gave me one wild look and ran, as if I were in alliance with the devil.

By now my curiosity was thoroughly aroused, and I was determined to see the thing through to a finish if it cost me my life. So, casting a last, contemptuous look on those poor, misguided souls, I stepped out briskly in the direction pointed out to me. However, I had gone but a scant two miles when the weight of the valises began to tell, and I slackened pace considerably.

THE sun was just disappearing beneath the treetops when I caught my first glimpse of the old homestead, now deserted but for its one occupant. Time and the elements had laid heavy hands upon it, for there was hardly a window that could boast its full quota of panes, while the shutters banged and creaked with a noise dismal enough to daunt even the strong of heart.

About one hundred yards back I discerned a small building built of gray stone, pieces of which seemed to be lying all around it, partly covered by the dense growth of vegetation that overran the entire countryside. On closer observation I realized that the building was a crypt, while what I had taken to be pieces of the material scattered around were really tombstones. Evidently this was the family burying-ground. But why had certain members been interred in a mausoleum while the remainder of the family had been buried in the ground in the usual manner?

Having observed thus much, I turned my steps toward the house, for I had no intention of spending the night with naught but the dead for company. Indeed, I began to realize just why those simple country folk had refused to aid me, and a hesitant doubt began to assert itself as to the expediency of my being here, when I might have been at the shore or at the country club enjoying life to the full.

By now the sun had completely slid from view, and in the semi-darkness the place presented an even drearier aspect than before. With a great display of bravado I stepped upon the veranda, slammed my grips upon a seat very much the worse for wear, and pulled lustily at the knob.

Peal after peal reverberated throughout the house, echoing and re-echoing from room to room, till the whole structure rang. Then all was still once more, save for the sighing of the wind and the creaking of the shutters.

A few minutes passed, and the sound of footsteps approaching the door reached my ears. Another interval, and the door

was cautiously opened a few inches, while a head shrouded by the darkness scrutinized me closely. Then the door was flung wide, and Remson (I hardly knew him, so changed was he) rushed forward and, throwing his arms around me, thanked me again and again for heeding his plea, till I thought he would go into hysterics.

I begged him to brace up, and the sound of my voice seemed to help him, for he apologized rather shamefacedly for his discourtesy and led the way along the wide hall. There was a fire blazing merrily in the sitting-room, and after partaking generously of a repast, for I was famished after my long walk, I was seated in front of it, facing Remson and waiting to hear his story.

"Jack," he began, "I'll start at the beginning and try to give you the facts in their proper sequence. Five years ago my family circle consisted of five persons: my grandfather, my father, two brothers, and myself, the baby of the family. My mother died, you know, when I was a baby. Now——"

His voice broke and for a moment he was unable to continue.

"There's only myself left," he went on, "and so help me God, I'm going, too, unless you can solve the damnable mystery that hovers over this house, and put an end to that something which took my kin and is gradually taking me.

"Granddad was the first to go. He spent the last few years of his life in South America. Just before leaving there he was attacked while asleep by one of those huge bats. Next morning he was so weak he couldn't walk. That awful thing had sucked his life-blood away. He arrived here, but was sickly until his death, a few weeks later. The medicos couldn't agree as to the cause of death; so they laid it to old age and let it go at that. But I knew better. It was his experience in the south that had done for him. In his will he asked that a crypt be built immediately and his body interred therein. His wish was carried out, and his remains lie in that little gray vault that you may have noticed if you cut around behind the house.

"Then my dad began failing and just pined away until he died. What puzzled the doctors was the fact that right up until the end he consumed enough food to sustain three men, yet he was so weak he lacked the strength to drag his legs over the floor. He was buried, or rather interred, with granddad. The same symptoms were in evidence in the cases of George and Fred. They are both lying in the vault. And now, Jack, I'm going, too, for of late my appetite has increased to alarming proportions, yet I am as weak as a kitten."

"Nonsense!" I chided. "We'll just leave this place for a while and take a trip somewhere, and when you return you'll laugh at your fears. It's all a case of overwrought nerves, and there is certainly nothing strange about the deaths you speak of. They are probably due to some hereditary disease. More than one family has passed out in a hurry just on that account."

"Jack, I only wish I could think so, but somehow I know better. And as for leaving here, I just can't get away. There is a morbid fascination about the place which holds me. If you want to be a real friend, just stick around for a couple of days, and if you don't find anything I'm sure the sight of you and the sound of your voice will do wonders for me."

I agreed to do my best, although I was hard put to keep from smiling at his fears, so apparently groundless were they. We talked on other subjects for several hours; then I proposed bed, saying that I was very tired after my journey and subsequent walk. Remson showed me to my room, and, after seeing that every-

thing was as comfortable as possible, he bade me good-night.

As he turned to leave the room, the flickering light from the lamp fell on his neck and I noticed two small punctures in the skin. I questioned him regarding them, but he replied that he must have beheaded a pimple and that he hadn't noticed them before. He again said good-night and left the room.

I UNDRESSED and tumbled into bed. During the night I was conscious of an overpowering feeling of suffocation—as if some great burden was lying on my chest which I could not dislodge; and in the morning, when I awoke, I experienced a curious sensation of weakness. I arose, not without an effort, and began divesting myself of my sleeping-suit.

As I folded the jacket I noticed a thin line of blood on the collar. I felt my neck, a terrible fear overwhelming me. It pained slightly at the touch. I rushed to examine it in the mirror. Two tiny dots rimmed with blood—my blood—and on my neck! No longer did I chuckle at Remson's fears, for *it*, the thing, had attacked me as I slept!

I dressed as quickly as my condition would permit and went downstairs, thinking to find my friend there. He was not about, so I looked about outside, but he was not in evidence. There was but one answer to the question. He had not yet arisen. It was nine o'clock, so I resolved to awaken him.

Not knowing which room he occupied, I entered one after another in a fruitless search. They were all in various stages of disorder, and the thick coating of dust on the furniture showed that they had been untenanted for some time. At last, in a bedroom on the north side of the third floor, I found him.

He was lying spread-eagle fashion across the bed, still in his pajamas, and

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as I leaned forward to shake him my eyes fell on two drops of blood, spattered on the coverlet. I crushed back a wild desire to scream and shook Remson rather roughly. His head rolled to one side, and the hellish perforations on his throat showed up vividly. They looked fresh and raw, and had increased to much greater dimensions. I shook him with increased vigor, and at last he opened his eyes stupidly and looked around. Then, seeing me, he said in a voice loaded with anguish, resignation, and despair:

"It's been here again, Jack. I can't hold out much longer. May God take my soul when I go!"

So saying, he fell back again from sheer weakness. I left him and went about preparing myself some breakfast. I had thought it best not to destroy his faith in me by telling him that I, too, had suffered at the hands of his persecutor.

A walk brought me some peace of mind, if not a solution, and when I returned about noon to the big house Remson was up and around. Together we prepared a really excellent meal. I was hungry and did justice to my share; but after I had finished, my friend continued eating until I thought he must either disgorge or burst. Then, after putting things to rights, we strolled about the long hall, looking at the oil paintings, many of which were very valuable.

At one end of the hall I discovered a portrait of an old gentleman, evidently a Beau Brummel in his day. He wore his hair in the long flowing fashion adopted by the old school, and sported a carefully trimmed mustache and Vandyke beard. Remson noticed my interest in the painting and came forward.

"I don't wonder that picture holds your interest, Jack. It has a great fascination for me, also. At times I sit for hours studying the expression on that face. I sometimes think he has something to tell me, but of course that's all tommyrot. But I beg your pardon, I haven't introduced the old gent yet, have I? This is my granddad. He was a great old boy in his day, and he might be living yet but for that cursed bloodsucker. Perhaps it is such a creature that's doing for me; what do you think?"

"I wouldn't like to venture an opinion, Remson, but unless I'm badly mistaken we must dig deeper for an explanation. We'll know tonight, however. You retire as usual and I'll keep a close watch and we'll solve the riddle or die in the attempt."

Remson said not a word, but silently extended his hand. I clasped it in a firm embrace, and in each other's eyes we read complete understanding. To change the trend of thought I questioned him on the servant problem.

"I've tried time and again to get servants that would stay," he replied, "but about the third day they would begin acting queer, and the first thing I'd know they'd have skipped, bag and baggage."

That night I accompanied my friend to his room and remained until he had disrobed and was ready to retire. Several of the window-panes were cracked, and one was entirely missing. I suggested boarding up the aperture, but he declined, saying that he rather enjoyed the night air; so I dropped the matter.

As it was still early, I sat by the fire in the sitting-room and read for an hour or two. I confess that there were many times when my mind wandered from the printed page before me and chills raced up and down my spine as some new sound was borne to my ears. The wind had risen, and was whistling through the trees with a peculiar whining sound. The creaking of the shutters tended to further the eery effect, and in the distance could be heard the hooting of numerous owls, mingled

(Please turn to page 246)

COMING NEXT MONTH

IN THE sun the shadow tracery of the grille's symbolic pattern lay vividly outlined on the ground. The girl gave a little gasp of delight. She dropped Smith's hand and ran forward three short steps, and plunged into the very center of that shadowy pattern on the ground. And what happened then was too incredible to believe.

The pattern ran over her like a garment, curving to the curve of her body in the way all shadows do. But as she stood there striped and laced with the darkness of it, there came a queer shifting in the lines of black tracery, a subtle, inexplicable movement to one side. And with that motion she vanished. It was exactly as if that shifting had moved her out of one world into another. Smith stared stupidly at the spot from which she had disappeared.

Then several things happened almost simultaneously. The zoom of an airplane broke suddenly into the quiet, a black shadow dipped low over the rooftops, and Smith, too late, realized that he stood defenseless in full view of the searching ships. There was only one way out, and that was too fantastic to put faith in, but he had no time to hesitate. With one leap he plunged full into the midst of the shadow of the tree of life.

Its tracery flowed round him, molding its pattern to his body. And outside the boundaries everything executed a queer little sidewise dip and slipped in the most extraordinary manner, like an optical illusion, into quite another scene. There was no intervention of blankness. It was as if he looked through the bars of a grille upon a picture which without warning slipped sidewise, while between the bars appeared another scene, a curious, dim landscape, gray as if with the twilight of early evening. The air had an oddly thickened look, through which he saw the quiet trees and the flower-spangled grass of the place with a queer, unreal blending, like the landscape in a tapestry, all its outlines blurred.

In the midst of this tapestried twilight the burning whiteness of the girl he had followed blazed like a flame. She had paused a few steps away and stood waiting, apparently quite sure that he would come after. . . .

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October WEIRD TALES . . . Out September 1

Four Wooden Stakes

(Continued from page 244)

with the cries of miscellaneous night fowl and other nocturnal creatures.

As I ascended the two flights of steps, the candle in my hand casting grotesque shadows on the walls and ceiling, I had little liking for my job. Many times in the course of duty I had been called upon to display courage, but it took more than mere courage to keep me going now.

I EXTINGUISHED the candle and crept forward to Remson's room, the door of which was closed. Being careful to make no noise, I knelt and looked in at the keyhole. It afforded me a clear view of the bed and two of the windows in the opposite wall. Gradually my eyes became accustomed to the darkness and I noticed a faint reddish glow outside one of the windows. It apparently emanated from nowhere. Hundreds of little specks danced and whirled in the spot of light, and as I watched them, fascinated, they seemed to take on the form of a human face. The features were masculine, as was also the arrangement of the hair. Then the mysterious glow disappeared.

So great had the strain been on me that I was wet from perspiration, although the night was cool. For a moment I was undecided whether to enter the room or to stay where I was and use the keyhole as a means of observation. I concluded that to remain where I was would be the better plan; so I once more placed my eye to the hole.

Immediately my attention was drawn to something moving where the light had been. At first, owing to the poor light, I was unable to distinguish the general outline and form of the thing; then I saw. It was a man's head.

So help me God, it was the exact reproduction of that picture I had seen in the hall that very morning. But oh, the difference in expression! The lips were drawn back in a snarl, disclosing two sets of pearly white teeth, the canines overdeveloped and remarkably sharp. The eyes, an emerald green in color, stared in a look of consuming hate. The hair was sadly disarranged, while on the beard was a large clot of what seemed to be congealed blood.

I noticed thus much; then the head melted from my sight and I transferred my attention to a great bat that circled round and round, his huge wings beating a tattoo on the panes. Finally he circled around the broken pane and flew straight through the hole made by the missing glass. For a few moments he was shut off from my view; then he reappeared and began circling around my friend, who lay sound asleep, blissfully ignorant of all that was occurring. Nearer and nearer it drew, then swooped down and fastened itself on Remson's throat, just over the jugular vein.

At this I rushed into the room and made a wild dash for the thing that had come night after night to gorge itself on my friend; but to no avail. It flew out of the window and away, and I turned my attention to the sleeper.

"Remson, old man, get up."

He sat up like a shot.

"What's the matter, Jack? Has it been here?"

"Never mind just now," I replied. "Just dress as hurriedly as possible. We have a little work before us this evening."

He glanced questioningly toward me, but followed my command without argument. I turned and cast my eye about the room for a suitable weapon. There was a stout stick lying in the corner and I made toward it.

"Jack!"

I wheeled about.

"What is it? Damn it all, haven't you any sense, almost scaring a man to death?"

He pointed a shaking finger toward the window.

"There! I swear I saw him. It was my granddad, but oh, how disfigured!"

He threw himself upon the bed and began sobbing. The shock had completely unnerved him.

"Forgive me, old man," I pleaded; "I was too quick. Pull yourself together and we may yet get to the bottom of things tonight."

When he had finished dressing we left the house. There was no moon out, and it was pitch-dark.

I led the way, and soon we came to within ten yards of the little gray crypt. I stationed Remson behind a tree with instructions to just use his eyes, and I took up my stand on the other side of the vault, after making sure that the door into it was closed and locked. For the greater part of an hour we waited without results, and I was about ready to call it off when I perceived a white figure flitting between the trees about fifty feet away.

Slowly it advanced, straight toward us, and as it drew closer I looked, not *at* it, but *through* it. The wind was blowing strongly, yet not a fold in the long shroud quivered. Just outside the vault it paused and looked around. Even knowing as I did about what to expect, it was a decided shock when I looked into the eyes of the old Holroyd, deceased these past five years. I heard a gasp and knew that Remson had seen, too, and recognized. Then the spirit, ghost, or whatever it was, passed into the crypt through the crack between the door and the jamb, a space not one-sixteenth of an inch wide.

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As it disappeared, Remson came running forward, his face wholly drawn of color.

"What was it, Jack? What was it? I know it resembled granddad, but it couldn't have been he. He's been dead five years!"

"Let us go back to the house," I answered, "and I'll explain things to the best of my ability. I may be wrong, of course, but it won't hurt to try my remedy. Remson, what we are up against is a vampire. Not the female species usually spoken of today, but the real thing. I noticed you had an old edition of the *Encyclopedia Brittanica*. If you'll bring me volume XXIV I'll be able to explain more fully the meaning of the word."

He left the room and returned, carrying the desired book. Turning to page 52, I read:

"Vampire. A term apparently of Servian origin originally applied in eastern Europe to blood-sucking ghosts, but in modern usage transferred to one or more species of blood-sucking bats inhabiting South America. . . . In the first mentioned meaning a vampire is usually supposed to be the soul of a dead man which quits the buried body by night to suck the blood of living persons. Hence, when the vampire's grave is opened his corpse is found to be fresh and rosy from the blood thus absorbed. . . . They are accredited with the power of assuming any form they may so desire, and often fly about as specks of dust, pieces of down or straw, etc. . . . To put an end to his ravages a stake is driven through him, or his head cut off, or his heart torn out, or boiling water and vinegar poured over the grave. . . . The persons who turn vampires are wizards, witches, suicides, and those who have come to a violent end. Also, the death of any one resulting from these vampires will cause that person to join their hellish throng. . . . See Calumet's *Dissertation on the Vampires of Hungary*."

I looked at Remson. He was staring straight into the fire. I knew that he realized the task before us and was steeling himself to it. Then he turned to me.

"Jack, we'll wait until morning."

That was all. I understood, and he knew. There we sat, each struggling with his own thoughts, until the first faint glimmers of light came struggling through the trees and warned us of approaching dawn.

REMSON left to fetch a sledge-hammer and a large knife with its edge honed to a razor-like keenness. I busied myself making four wooden stakes, shaped like wedges. He returned bearing the horrible tools, and we struck out toward the crypt. We walked rapidly, for had either of us hesitated an instant I verily believe both would have fled incontinently. However, our duty lay clearly before us.

Remson unlocked the door and swung it outward. With a prayer on our lips, we entered.

As if by mutua. understanding, we both turned toward the coffin on our left. It belonged to the grandfather. We displaced the lid, and there lay the old Holroyd. He appeared to be sleeping; his face was full of color, and he had none of the stiffness of death. The hair was matted, the mustache untrimmed, and on the beard were stains of a dull brownish hue.

But it was his eyes that attracted me. They were greenish, and they glowed with an expression of fiendish malevolence such as I had never seen before. The look of baffled rage on the face might well have adorned the features of the devil in his hell.

Remson swayed and would have fallen, bu I forced some whisky down his throat and he took a grip on himself. He placed one of the stakes directly over its heart, then shut his eyes and prayed that the good God above take this soul that was to be delivered unto Him.

I took a step backward, aimed care-

fully, and swung the sledge with all my strength. It hit the wedge squarely, and a terrible scream filled the place, while the blood gushed out of the open wound, up, and over us, staining the walls and our clothes. Without hesitating, I swung again, and again, and again, while it struggled vainly to rid itself of that awful instrument of death. Another swing and the stake was driven through.

The thing squirmed about in the narrow confines of the coffin, much after the manner of a dismembered worm, and Remson proceeded to sever the head from the body, making a rather crude but effectual job of it. As the final stroke of the knife cut the connection a scream issued from the mouth; and the whole corpse fell away into dust, leaving nothing but a wooden stake lying in a bed of bones.

This finished, we dispatched the remaining three. Simultaneously, as if struck by the same thought, we felt our throats. The slight pain was gone from mine, and the wounds had entirely disappeared from my friend's, leaving not even a scar.

I wished to place before the world the whole facts contingent upon the mystery and the solution, but Remson prevailed upon me to hold my peace.

Some years later Remson died a Christian death, and with him went the only confirmation of my tale. However, ten miles from the little town of Charing there sits an old house, forgotten these many years, and near it is a little gray crypt. Within are four coffins; and in each lies a wooden stake stained a brownish hue, and bearing the finger prints of the deceased Remson Holroyd.

BACK COPIES

Because of the many requests for back issues of WEIRD TALES, the publishers do their best to keep a sufficient supply on hand to meet all demands. This magazine was established early in 1923 and there has been a steady drain on the supply of back copies ever since. At present, we have the following back numbers on hand for sale:

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Apr.	Apr.	Apr.	Apr.	Apr.
....	May	May	May	May
June	June	June	June	June
July	July	July	July	July
Aug.	Aug.	Aug.	Aug.	....
Sept.	....	Sept.	Sept.	....
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YOU, the readers of WEIRD TALES, will notice that this issue is dated August-September, instead of merely August. The change in dating is made in accordance with the current trend in magazine dating, so that WEIRD TALES will be on sale during the month preceding the date printed on the cover. Our next issue (October) will appear on the stands the first of September; so there will be no break in continuity. All subscriptions will be automatically extended one month.

Death of Robert E. Howard

As this issue goes to press, we are saddened by the news of the sudden death of Robert E. Howard at Cross Plains, Texas. Mr. Howard for years has been one of the most popular magazine authors in the country. He was master of a vivid literary style and possessed an inexhaustible imagination. His poems were works of sheer genius. His fictional characters—the dour Puritan adventurer and redresser of wrongs, Solomon Kane; the ancient battle-chief King Kull from the shadowy kingdoms of the dawn of history; the doughty barbarian soldier of fortune, Conan—were so convincingly and vividly drawn that they seemed to step out from the printed page and grip the sympathies of the readers. It was in WEIRD TALES that the cream of his writing appeared. Mr. Howard was one of our literary discoveries. He made his literary debut in WEIRD TALES of July, 1925, while he was still a student in the University of Texas. Since then sixty works from his hand have appeared in this magazine. Prolific though he was, his genius shone through everything he wrote, and he did not lower his high literary standard for the sake of mere volume. *Red Nails,* his current serial in WEIRD TALES, is the last of the stories about Conan, though several of Mr. Howard's stories with other heroes will appear in this magazine. His loss will be keenly felt.

An Ace Issue

Robert A. Madle, of Philadelphia, writes: "The June WEIRD TALES was another ace issue. Everything composing it was *good.* The cover was the weirdest Margaret Brundage ever did. The Count looks as weird and uncanny as Dracula himself. *Loot of the Vampire* was an excellent piece of fantastic fiction. Thorp McClusky surely has 'what it takes.' His first story ranks as my favorite in the current issue. Hugh Davidson's *House of the Evil Eye* closely follows Mr. McClusky's yarn. I recognized Doctor Dale as one of the chief characters of *The Vampire-Master,* published a few years back. The other stories were all good, especially *Black Canaan.*"

Strange Interval

Wilfred Wright, of Toronto, writes: "All stories in the current issue show the usual fine literary style, although this issue is markedly lacking in weirdness. I await with keen interest your readers' comment on Seabury Quinn's *Strange Interval*—a splendid horror story of unrefined brutality; but remembering this author's de Grandin yarns one must forgive the lapse from weirdness. While I enjoyed it immensely, and would unhesitatingly give it first place, it automatically disqualifies itself, and Burks' *The Room of Shadows* gets the call, followed closely by Hamilton's *Child of the Winds. The Graveyard Rats* by Kuttner was the most gruesome weird tale this year. Generally WT progresses splendidly over the many years I have been a reader, and I wish you continued success."

Miss Hemken's Comments

Gertrude Hemken, of Chicago, writes: "June comments as follows, to wit: Thorp McClusky is a new author to me, but his *Loot of the Vampire* promises something very, very interesting. The fact that a detective detail is involved should bring no unfavorable comment, inasmuch as it is a vampire story. I feel that it shows an example of the modern police system against something far more ancient and deep than any form of public protection. It is truly a spine-freezing tale. Another new note in vampire tales—the Count, if *he* is the vampire, resorts to robbery. I never knew them to do that. Aaaahh! *Black Canaan* was also perfect, the kind one reads with eyes popping and mouth agape. Is this a form of voodoo one reads so much of, or is it something more ancient? And then I learned something more, of which I had only a smattering knowledge—that of the evil eye. Somehow I had believed the evil eye was used only on such persons as the possessor wished to harm. So—you are proving educational to me as well. It seems I have not been fair in not including comments on the poetry in my monthly letter, inasmuch as I am a lover of poetry. This *Ballad of the Wolf* I found pleasant reading. There was a rhythmic swing to it, and although it spoke of olden days, I found no obsolete words. I have no objections to such words in prose, but they seem to jar the rhythm of poetry. Invariably I don't know what they mean, I'm not sure of my pronunciation, and that kinda spoils it. I think Henry Kuttner is a pretty good rimester. I hope to see more of his work. *The Ruler of Fate* ended to my satisfaction. Narsty Aru was killed dead and lovely Athonee was left to control her machine of destiny with kindliness to the man of Earth. And I s'pose the hero and heroine were married and lived happily ever afterward. I found *The Harbor of Ghosts* very interesting. Somehow it was different from what I had been reading, and when the young sailor entered the harbor of ghost ships, I had the impression of the fabled elephants' graveyard. There was a similarity in that the lost ship sought a final resting-place with others of its kind. The reprint, *The Brain in the Jar*, surprized me. I had figured it to be a brain wielding malignant power and cruel devastating horror. However, it was a very nice brain and sought

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only to destroy the man who had tortured the man of whom the disembodied brain was once a part. I wouldn't call that operation weird surgery—merely cold-blooded unfeeling science. Nuff sed—will greet you again next month. Mayhap you will have some real chillers, which will be doubly welcome, if I know Chicago's summers."

"A Punch in the Nose"

William L. Ebelein, of Baltimore, writes: "My seven favorite authors in order are Quinn, Moore, Kline, Williamson, Davidson, Hamilton and Howard. The Jules de Grandin stories by Quinn are very good. Please try your best to make Quinn write more de Grandin stories. It has been nearly six months since you published the last one. I have noticed, with very much regret, that during the past three years Quinn has given us only about ten de Grandin stories. A few years ago I remember Quinn wrote about six or seven de Grandin stories per year. Make him produce or I will feel like giving him a good punch in the nose. I think it about time for Kline to give us one of his fantastic novels about Mars, Venus, or any other planet very soon. What say?" [A superb story about Jules de Grandin, entitled *Witch-House*, will be published soon.—THE EDITOR.]

Weirder Than Ever

Nils Helmer Frome, of East Orange, New Jersey, writes: "I halted as I sped past a magazine stand—I always do that—magazines have a fascination for me. WEIRD TALES wasn't the only one I looked at, but it held my gaze the longest. I lingered and languished—my purse wasn't exactly blooded. I bought it. That is the synopsis on the repeating incident that is among the most important in my years. WEIRD TALES has become weird again—or else my appreciation has risen. The covers of the last two issues were wonderfully weird. Great credit due to Brundage—she's really quite competent when she gets started—if she would only quit those nothing-on dames—she has no idea what a female figure looks like, even if she is a woman herself. Although I am far from an authority in that line myself, I know that a figure true to life is far from what can be effected by even a skilled guesser. And that external sadness in those eyebrows lifted in between the temples gets me with its monotony; why not a pointed pair of eyelashes, such meaning a mischievous nature; an arching pair—or a pair that swing in a curve from the temples and drop back; anything but those poor, fluttery lines Brundage favors always. Brundage must have such eyebrows—and the general contour of the faces of her bright-eyed heroines—for almost invariably an artist favors his or her type to depict. And why not put more life and horror into the faces—a shrinking type—a staring type—a fascinated type—a shadowed full-face type—a fainting type with half-closed eyes. The hands might be bettered, too. Advise her, Editor, to watch people's hands and catch their personality—their grace."

The Two Ranking Authors

H. W. Morlan, of Fort Knox, Kentucky, writes: "I feel a bit timid, since this is my first letter to the readers' forum. I have followed the magazine since its inception and have at last worked up courage enough to write. Since you ask your readers' opinions on the stories appearing in our magazine, let me say that the two ranking authors, in my opinion, are H. P. Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith. Lovecraft has no equal for horror build-up. His climaxes hit you like Schmeling's right-hand punch. Howard's creations, Kull and Conan, are superb. Your other authors are too numerous to enumerate, but the majority turn in the high quality of work typical of our magazine. . . . Whether or not this is printed I remain an enthusiastic booster of the best magazine on the market."

Is This Sarcasm?

Marshall Lemer, of New York City, writes: "Occasionally, in the tumult and the shouting over the latest exquisite little tale featuring Jules de Grandin, one still comes upon a reader that feels impelled to bring up the subject of nudes on the covers, a question that I thought had been settled long ago. *De gustibus non est disputandum:* thus one young man writes that he 'didn't expect the stories to match the covers', while another earnest critic sadly notes that 'a reader is ashamed to buy a copy (because of the cover) on the news stands.' But let the discussion turn out as it will, I must say that I admire the artistic sense that prompts Brundage to select invariably what is frequently the one nude in the entire issue for the cover illustration. Indubitably she adopts

this policy in order to attract new lovers of the weird and unusual to our ever-widening circle of readers. And to add to the confusion of the old guard, when they finally persuade Brundage to cover her naked women, she does so in such a manner that more readers write in to ask that such indecent pictures be stopped. And so, when I say that I like nudes, since they seem to arouse a certain eery thrill (in admiration of the weird elements that Brundage portrays so well, of course), I seem to be concurring with the general opinion. True, occasionally I receive a curious glance from the gentleman that presides over the local news stand when I ask for WEIRD TALES, and once I received a copy of Spice and Ginger Stories in pardonable error, but I am no Milquetoast, and can bear the bitter with the sweet as well as the rest."

He Wants Lovecraft's Stories

Ivan Funderburgh, R. R. 5, Huntington, Indiana, writes: "The best story of the May issue is *The Faceless God*. That is one of the best stories I have ever read. I intend to re-read it many times. The history of Nyarlathotep is interesting. Bloch is approaching Lovecraft. Finlay's illustration is wonderful. I enjoyed *Strange Interval*, but the shark incident isn't enough to make it weird fiction. . . . If this should get into the Eyrie, would any reader be willing to sell me Lovecraft's works at a reasonable price? If so, will he please send me a price list?"

Satan's Sub-villain

Robert W. Lowndes, of Canaan, Connecticut, writes: "It is almost with trepidation that one picks up the June issue; the April and May numbers were so excellent in every respect, a let-down seems almost inevitable. If the illustrations are in any way indicative of the stories themselves, then one's fears can be laid; they are splendid. There is one complaint, though: the lettering on the cover. Is the billboard effect necessary? Of course, all the cheap magazines do it, but that is why it seems so utterly out of place in WT. Moreover, I had expected to see you adopt permanently the block picture style you had on the May issue. It is so eminently superior to the others, so completely distinctive and unique, one wonders why you ever left it. Of course, it is admitted that it does cut down a bit on the cover picture. But the May cover did not

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suffer in any respect because the figures were not complete; you had this style of cover in 1931, I recall; why not effect a joyful return? Think also of the many readers who save WT covers; what a boon a picture, neatly blocked off, devoid of all lettering, is to them! They must either take the cover, besprinkled with ads which do not in any way add to the languorous charms of Mrs. Brundage's beauties, as is, or must cut out the figures. And the lettering below the picture on the May cover is conspicuous enough, yea, even more than the mass effect on the June cover. Again, there is the script heading, 'The Unique Magazine,' truly a part of WT's personality. Can we not have that, at least? One hopes that sufficient letters pour in from other readers similarly minded to show that there is a real majority of feeling on this score. Allow me to pan Mr. Paul Ernst, before going any farther, for his remarkable sub-villain, Girse. Of course, it is not uncommon for WT characters to die several times before making their final exit, but this one had a truly unique demise. He was utterly consumed in *The Consuming Flame* (quite appropriately) and Satan vowed vengeance. The doctor must have found enough remnants of his departed henchman to revive him, because Girse is well and healthy in *Horror Insured* until Keane again sends him to a fiery doom. And again Doctor Satan vows vengeance; I looked for Girse to appear in *The Devil's Double* but evidently Satan decided that Girse was too vulnerable for further resurrections. Perhaps Bostiff, now dead for the first time, can outdo Girse's record. Outside of this one amusing boner, the series have been fine."

Comments on the June Issue

Charles H. Bert, of Philadelphia, writes: "I liked the June issue. For the first time in months you have a real *weird* cover. Count Woerz, who holds the fragile morsel of humanity in his hands, is certainly evil-looking and would raise the hair on a bald spot. M. Brundage has just the right mixture of the pastel crayons, green and yellow, on the Count's face, giving the expression of a dead-alive corpse. The cover is commendable and in the spirit of the magazine. I have not read *Loot of the Vampire*, but I am sure it will come up to expectations. Without a doubt the best story in the issue is *Black Canaan* by Robert E. Howard. He shows a knowledge of the southern Cajuns and displays it pridefully. If I may say so, I consider *Black Canaan* superior to *The Hour of the Dragon*, and weirder. The Conan stories are generally spoiled by excessive slaughter. I cannot be weirdly thrilled month after month, year after year, in which the hero is always slaughtering his enemies with a two-fisted sword. The first few tales were splendid with a primitive power and fired the imagination. But the ones that followed consist of practically the same thing with not much variation in plots. The main thing in those stories was the excessive slaughter. 'Red battles' and 'mighty deeds' don't inspire one with a weird feeling; perhaps to others they do, but not to me. Here's hoping *Red Nails*, the new Conan serial, pleases me. The description sounds good. I like Hugh Davidson's *House of the Evil Eye* very much, although I know that Davidson is the *nom de plume* of Edmond Hamilton. You see, the style of writing betrays him. Hamilton is turning out some very good yarns lately, and I rate *House of the Evil Eye* among his best. The story is not as impossible as it sounds. I have a clipping somewhere in my file of strange facts which states that the eye emanates a ray which affects certain forms of vegetable growths. Incredible, but true. It was a recent discovery of modern science. Hamilton is very good when he turns out stories like *Child of the Winds*, *In the World's Dusk*, and *Murder in the Grave*, and quite otherwise when he turns out such junk as *The Six Sleepers*, with its warped misguided future civilization, and *The Great Brain of Kaldar* with its lifeless stock characters, impossible happenings, and brainless entities. I was surprized to find *The Brain In the Jar* as a reprint. I gave up hope years ago of ever seeing that splendid story once more in WEIRD TALES. If I remember correctly, the story was requested by a reader in 1929. I enjoyed it very much and it still stands out as one of the 'eye of prophecy' stories; one of those stories upon which the fame of the magazine was built. It is still unique and different. I don't consider the story impossible. A few months ago Russian scientists discovered a means of preserving living human blood for three months, and you know how complex blood is. Those admirable Russians are going ahead with the

human tissues, and who knows in another year or so, may find the means of preserving living parts of the human anatomy? Doctor A. Carrel, you know, has kept the heart of a chicken alive for twenty-five years. So you see, in the light of modern science, the impossible sounds possible after all. *The Telephone in the Library* by August W. Derleth was fine. His tales are told with a prosaic naturalness carrying the illusion of reality and never disappoint one. I have never read a poor yarn by him. *The Grinning Ghoul* by Robert Bloch is the best thing he has ever done. It seems to me that Bloch continues to become better in each succeeding tale. The English atmosphere in *The Druidic Doom* wasn't convincing to me. More than half of the story was taken up by tedious descriptions of the legend which formed the background of the story. I found the same fault with the African desert scene of *The Faceless God*. Bloch is on familiar ground in his latest concoction and is no slouch with the pen. *The Ruler of Fate* by Jack Williamson comes to a satisfactory conclusion. His characters are human beings and not like the dummies I have read in stories in other magazines. Athonee appeals to me very much, even if she wasn't a human being. Aru is a despicable person and I would be delighted with the job of choking him. *Golden Blood* still remains as Williamson's most outstanding story. The best of the short stories was *The Harbor of Ghosts* by Bardine. *Lethe* was a very good yarn, and *Mordecai's Pipe* will delight the hearts of pipe connoisseurs."

Concise Comments

Paul M. Guignon, of Philadelphia, writes: "I am quite a reader of WEIRD TALES. I like the way it is distinguished from other magazines of its kind. Of all the stories you have published, I enjoyed particularly *The Thing in the Fog*, by Seabury Quinn, in the March issue of 1933. That story, I am sure, is a masterpiece of weird fiction."

Edmond Hamilton writes from his home in Pennsylvania: "I think your June number has a more arresting cover get-up than any yet. I mean the vertical story-list on the cover seems a swell idea to me, and I hope you keep it up."

Mrs. H. H. Hughes, of Lawton, Oklahoma, writes: "Beginning with the first issue of WEIRD TALES, in 1923, why not take

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John V. Baltadonis, of Philadelphia, writes: "No wonder the characters in Thorp McClusky's *Loot of the Vampire* considered the Count an eery monster! He certainly looks it, at least in Mrs. Brundage's picturization of that fiendish monster. I was disappointed that *Loot of the Vampire* turned out to be a serial. Think of it, I'll have to wait a few issues before I can read the rest of the story."

Alan Chesselet, of Bandon, Oregon, writes: "I have been reading your magazine for about three years and look forward to reading it for a long while yet. As long as I can remember, my mother has bought it and read it, and she talks and praises it so much that she has me reading it."

Doctor Satan's Secret

Beverly G. Grocke, of Arlington, New Jersey, writes: "What about Paul Ernst letting us in on his secret? Who is Doctor Satan? And why isn't he ever caught with his mask off? Can't he die? *The Rajah's Gift*, your April reprint, was very good. . . . Give us something like C. L. Moore's *Yvala* again; it was a honey. Yours for better weird tales."

Against the Covers

E. M. Stubbs, of Detroit, writes: "I am well satisfied with your stories, but I do not like your covers. Brundage has deteriorated, greatly, since she began illustrating in 1933. Her covers are *not* weird; and after seeing practically the same woman on the cover, month after month, it grows tiresome, to say the least. The best artists you have ever had are St. John and C. C. Senf. I suggest that you let them each do at least one cover. Give them a trial, and see how your readers like them."

Books of Weird Tales

Jesse Mackay, of Tacoma, writes: "I have been reading your magazine for three years now, and I'd like to make a suggestion. Why couldn't you publish your stories in book form, with illustrations taken from the cover designs? Of course, go on printing the magazine, but have these for the ones that would really like to keep the stories. I've been saving the magazine, but it is hard to keep them in good condition. My favorite for the June issue is *Black Canaan*, by Robert E. Howard.

Most Popular Story

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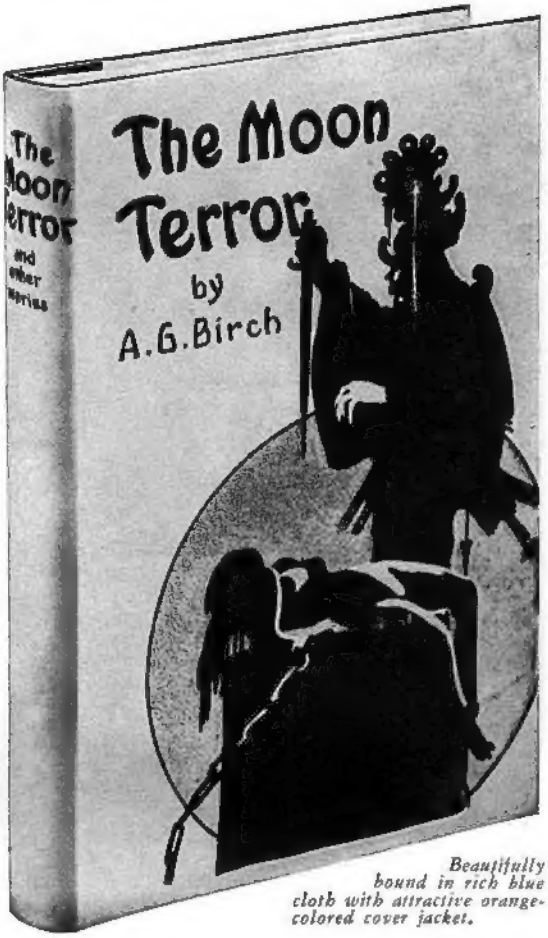

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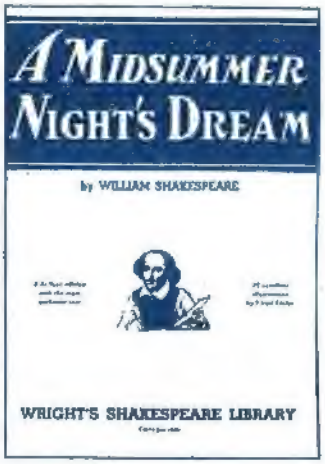

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